

***The Empathy World Café,  
a qualitative exploration of the needs behind the call for empathy in society.***

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***Master Thesis***

May, 2019

MSc. Positive Psychology and Technology

Twente University

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## ABSTRACT

**Introduction:** A call for more empathy in society is often heard in contemporary social rhetoric in the Netherlands as well as in other countries. This appears to reflect real needs existing in the public, yet they often fail to clarify these needs and to propose strategies to address these needs. The word "empathy" is not clearly defined, and the meaning varies across different contexts further confusing the issue. Psychological research has shown that Empathy has positive effects on wellbeing and that it can be stimulated. This study aims to explore the needs behind the call for empathy in society through engaging members of the public in conversation through a qualitative, inductive design. The study's research questions are: what are the needs behind the call for more empathy in society? and: how can these needs be addressed?

**Method:** The public is engaged in dialogue about empathy through the qualitative World Café method. The first world Café, is held in Enschede on July 10th 2018 with a total of 9 participants. A second world Café is held in Amsterdam on November 2nd 2018 with 14 participants. The World Café event starts with a short introduction setting the context and introducing the questions: "What are the needs behind the call for more empathy in society?" and "How can these needs be addressed?". The method itself consists of a series of informal conversations between groups of participants with rotating constitution, followed by a harvesting round where insights and conclusions from these conversations are reported and recorded. The recorded harvesting rounds are analyzed inductively.

**Results:** The World Café participants reported many statements regarding the topic that were explored during the dialogue rounds, including descriptions of empathy, personal experiences with empathy, questions about empathy and concrete strategies to stimulate empathy. Reported strategies were predominantly aimed at personal development, education, representation and dialogue.

**Discussion:** The World Café events generate several insights about the needs behind empathy, which are expressed from different perspectives and can also be understood on different levels or scales such as social, local, spiritual, relational and individual. Some needs expressed on different levels are suggested to be in conflict with each other, possibly resulting from the fuzziness of the meaning of 'empathy'. Although the World Café results are not expected to represent the wider public due to the qualitative nature of the method, the World Café method appears to be a useful tool for engaging communities and for generating ideas.

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## INTRODUCTION

A call for more empathy in society is often heard in contemporary social rhetoric in the Netherlands as well as in other countries. Conflicts and tensions within society are said to result from, or to be sustained by, a lack of empathic understanding between different groups, and it is suggested that social relations and circumstances would improve if people would learn to understand each other's experience through empathy. Such social rhetoric does not usually expand into strategies for encouraging more empathy in society, and even a clear definition of what is meant by the word 'empathy' is usually omitted.

In psychological research the phenomenon called 'empathy' has been researched extensively, and is shown to be an important factor in psychological and social wellbeing. (e.g. Rumble, Van Lange and Parks, 2010; Williams et al, 2015; Jolliffe and Farrington, 2006). In a Meta-analysis, Butters (2010) found indications that empathy increases pro-social behavior, helps individuals establish and maintain interpersonal relationships, enhances satisfaction in intimate and family relationships, is positively associated with family cohesion, parental support, and communicative responsiveness and can reduce aggression.

This thesis will focus on the exploration of the needs behind the call for empathy, and on possible strategies for addressing them.

### THE CALL FOR EMPATHY IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL RHETORIC.

It is important to understand the broad cultural context of the problem. A comprehensive study of empathy in the media is outside the scope of this introduction, but some attention for the social and political rhetoric that call for more empathy are relevant for an understanding of the broad cultural context of this research. A few salient examples of rhetoric where such a call is made will be outlined.

A salient example can be found in the political rhetoric of US President Barack Obama (2008) who repeatedly addressed what he called "The Empathy Deficit". Another example is found in the book: *The Science of Evil*, in which Simon Baron-Cohen (2012) postulates that, to better understand the concept of "Evil", we should start by substituting the word "Evil" with "empathy erosion". In his view,

a big factor in any cruelty demonstrated by people is an absence of empathy. According to Simon Baron-Cohen: Empathy itself is the most valuable resource in our world.

Perhaps the most salient example of such rhetoric in recent Dutch politics are the statements of Jesse Klaver, the party leader of the progressive party 'Groenlinks' who explicitly calls out the need for more empathy. Klaver published the essay "The empathic society" (2016), in which he argues that especially discussions between groups with different ethnic and cultural backgrounds are increasingly polarizing. He argues that contemporary cultural debates are lacking any intention to hear the arguments of both sides. Klaver argues that people need to listen to each other especially when they disagree, that we need to move the discussion from specific symbols to the underlying issues which really matter such as our cultural identity. Klaver does not outline concrete strategies for increasing empathy (Klaver, 2016). The Dutch author Robert Vuijsje (Het Parool, 2016) spoke on the day of Empathy, and his plea is very similar to that of Jesse Klaver, identifying the same cultural divide in Dutch society. He specifically defined empathy as not only thinking from one's own story, as this is easy and relate-able, but as the ability to put oneself in the perspective of someone who has a different story from your own. Similarly, Dutch actor Nasrdin Dchar (Youtube, 2016) talks about cultural tensions and the demonstrated tendency to outvoice and overwhelm each other when disagreement occurs. Dchar says that answers will not come from politics but has to come from the public. For Flemish author David van Reybrouck (2017) empathy means listening to yourself: what you are actually feeling and needing, and listening to others without immediately reacting. He claims that in addition to mitigating cultural tension empathy is also important in preventing or mitigating a wide range of mental health problems. Van Reybrouck hopes that the Dutch and Belgian governments pick up on the available empathy related tools and facilitate their application, specifically through teaching mindfulness and nonviolent communication in schools.

The recently deceased mayor of Amsterdam, Eberhard van der Laan has also lectured about empathy as the best answer to social tensions that exist specifically in Amsterdam (Van der Laan, 2014). He poses the central question of how animosity, racism and hate between groups can be avoided without resorting to intolerance. He claims that any conflict can only be resolved if we start by understanding each other's suffering. We need to listen to each other's suffering, without comparison or

quantification, and understand each other's moral compasses, which are rooted in suffering. He does not give concrete strategies on how listening to understand each other's suffering can be facilitated.

These examples do not exhaust all that has been said about empathy in the media. The examples do have a strong resemblance to each other in that they mainly call for empathy in the context of tensions between (cultural) groups, and that they generally express that we need to start listening to each other emphatically while omitting concrete strategies of how empathic listening could actually be promoted. . In each of the examples empathy is not clearly defined or even clearly differentiated from related concepts such as compassion or tolerance.

### *WHAT IS EMPATHY?*

It is not universally clear what is exactly meant by the term "empathy". The definition of "empathy" differs greatly between different theorists and researchers (Batson, 2009). '*Empathy*' is defined by the Oxford Dictionary (2017) as "*the ability to understand and share the feelings of another*", and is not uniformly defined across different studies, theories and commentaries (Batson, 2009). A quick overview of the construct of empathy in the different fields of philosophy and social science illustrates: How broadly diverse the application of the word is and how easily one might be confused by this diversity; How important it is to clearly define what 'empathy' refers to in any given context; How few limitations there are to what sort of concept or process 'empathy' can be used to describe (behavioral, neurological, cognitive, experiential, metaphysical etc), which suggests a need for a letting go of preconceptions and expectations in the exploration of the concept.

There is no consensus for a definition of 'empathy', and this poses a challenge to anyone trying to interpret different studies on 'empathy' in relation to each other. It also complicates any communication about the concept of 'empathy' as it is hard to ensure that everyone involved is ascribing the same meaning to the word (Batson, 2009). Batson describes 8 distinct meanings for the term 'empathy' as applied by contemporary theorists, researchers and clinicians:

- 1). Knowing another person's internal state, including his or her thoughts and feelings
- 2). Adopting the posture or matching the neural responses of an observed other
- 3). Coming to feel as another person feels
- 4). Intuiting or projecting oneself into another's situation

- 5). Imagining how another is thinking and feeling
- 6). Imagining how one would think and feel in the other's place
- 7). Feeling distress at witnessing another person's suffering
- 8). Feeling for another person who is suffering

Definitions 7 and 8 do not necessarily describe empathy as (part of) the process of recognizing; understanding; experiencing or communicating someone else's internal state, but arguably breach into the domain of personal distress, compassion and sympathy instead.

Within the field of psychology, regardless of the exact definition that is used, empathy is often seen as a multidimensional process encompassing the following three general components:

- 1). An *affective response* to another's feelings or mental state, this often involves sharing that person's emotional state to some extent;
- 2). A *cognitive capacity* to assume another person's perspective;
- 3). A *regulatory mechanisms* that can distinguish between one's own feelings and feelings of others.

(Decety & Jackson, 2004)

The regulatory mechanism might be a crucial factor in how we react to any degree of experiencing another person's perspective or mental state. One possibility is reacting with *empathic concern*, which is the tendency to experience sympathetic, positive emotions toward others. Another possibility is reacting with *personal distress*, the tendency to experience anxiety and negative emotions towards oneself (Decety & Lamm, 2011).

In the existing research we also see a distinction between empathy as a *personality trait* that varies between people, and empathy as a *mental-state* that varies in time within a person (Weisz & Zaki, 2017; Nezlek, Feist, Wilson & Plesko, 2001). Nezlek and colleagues found that most current research deals with empathy as a trait, as the frequency of measurements within individuals is insufficient for an assessment of how empathy may vary in time within individual subjects. They also found that, when recorded in different situations, the level of empathy demonstrated by an individual at a given time is a function of trait characteristics (i.e. having an empathic personality) and state characteristics (i.e. experiencing events that augment empathy). Individuals do differ in their levels of empathy, yet the level of empathy at a given time also depends on situational factors, especially the number of social interactions that someone has recently experienced (Nezlek, Feist, Wilson & Plesko, 2001).

The 8 categories postulated by Batson (2009) do not exhaustively describe all different meanings of empathy. The concept of empathy has also been described in the fields of philosophy and theology where it is often described as a fundamental part of the human experience. For example, the phenomenological philosopher Edith Stein (1989) theorized that empathy is a unique and irreducible act of perceiving consciousness other than one's own. According to Stein, empathy is how we know that other minds exist, since the experience of others is given to us through our empathetic experiences. According to this view, our experience of the mental states of others goes beyond mere inference based on outward bodily motions compared to our own inner experiences. This is similar to how the mechanical causation that explains physical phenomena cannot explain spiritual and consciousness related phenomena. According to Stein, empathy is also necessary for us to be able to know ourselves. (McDaniel, 2014.)

The philosopher Martin Buber used a different terminology to talk about the same issues, and his conceptualization of how people relate to each other is often used to illustrate what is really meant by empathy by some authors and empathy trainers (e.g. Rosenberg, 2012). According to Buber (1970) the self can only really exist in relation to a non-objectifiable other. He separates the I into what he regards as the two primary words: I-Thou and I-It, referring to two distinct ways of existing, as this is defined by how you are relating to the world. I-It refers to how people relate to objects, determined by causal inferences. The I-It relationship is one-way and does not distinguish between objects and people. I-Thou refers to two-way relationships of shared experience of a fundamentally different nature. I-Thou is based in dialogue and requires what Buber calls Presence. In I-It relationships the now is like an abstract idea about what lies between past and future. Only in I-Thou relationships, and therefore only in relating to others, it is possible to experience and truly exist in the moment. Buber relates or even equates this to finding God. Buber regards meeting someone with this presence, which has been used synonymously with empathy (e.g. Rosenberg, 2012) as the most precious gift that one person can give to another. Also a challenging gift as Presence and the I-Thou way of relating require letting go of preconceptions and expectations while meeting and relating with the other in the present moment. (Buber, 1970).



Philosophical conceptualizations of empathy such as those by Stein and Buber might be important to include in any qualitative exploration of empathy because of how they contrast the sort of definitions of empathy that are applied in social and behavioral sciences out of the necessity to be able to operationalize and measure them. Because there are many diverse ways in which empathy has been conceptualized it is challenging to describe the concept even in general terms. The most that can confidently be said is that, in all its uses, empathy is related to how we recognize a conscious, experiencing, living process in others, and how we can relate this to our own conscious, experiencing, living processes. Generally empathy refers to the whole or some part of the process of recognizing and understanding, and sometimes experiencing the sensations, emotions and desires that are experienced by someone else, and/or communicating such understanding.

#### THE VALUE OF EMPATHY

Although there is some controversy (Bloom, 2013) and much confusion about the definition (Batson, 2009), there is a growing multidisciplinary body of empirical research that shows us how empathy (defined differently but within the first 6 meanings of the list by Batson (2009) can be beneficial to people's wellbeing and relationships.

An example of the benefit of empathy on the individual level is mitigation of loneliness (Forsythe & Forsythe, 2014). Loneliness is a growing problem that causes personal distress and dissatisfaction in a large part of the British population and is also linked to the development of a range of health problems. Loneliness is not the same thing as solitude. Subjective loneliness depends on the quality of relationships with other people much more than it depends on the quantity of interactions (Holt-Lunstad, Smith, Baker, Harris & Stephenson, 2015) It has been demonstrated that informal variations of empathic communication can relieve psychological distress, prevent mental illness and protect against physical disease. This is similar to the effects of more formal talking-cures that heavily rely on empathy when delivered by professional therapists (Forsythe & Forsythe, 2014).

The benefits of empathy when applied within the context of a professional role have also received extensive examination and theorization. Research in psychotherapeutic settings has shown that empathy related behavior in therapists correlates with positive therapy outcome (Lambert and Barley, 2001). Research has also shown multiple beneficial effects of empathy as it is applied in other helping

professions such as medicine and nursing (Williams et al, 2015). Higher levels of empathy can be a protective factor for psychological problems: Wagaman, Geiger, Shockley and Segal (2015) found that social workers who demonstrate higher levels of empathy are less likely to suffer from burnout and secondary traumatic stress. They suggest more incorporation of empathy training to social workers in order to safeguard the professionals' wellbeing.

As said, empathy also benefits people's wellbeing on an interpersonal level. In a study on the social benefits of Empathy, Rumble, Van Lange and Parks (2010) conclude that empathy is broadly beneficial for social interaction, that empathy can be an effective tool for coping with misinterpreted behavior, and that it can enhance cooperation to reach shared goals.

Empathy has a crucial role in the development of moral reasoning (Jolliffe and Farrington, 2006). For example, Amy Zelidman (2014) found that 7th and 8th grade students who displayed low empathy demonstrated more moral disengagement and involvement in peer-bullying behavior than students who displayed more empathy. In 'Group Empathy Theory' research there are even signs that empathy experienced by members of a group can create support for other groups in situations where the groups are in direct competition for resources (Sirin, Villalobos, and Valentino, 2016).

## EXPLORING EMPATHY RELATED NEEDS IN SOCIETY

If we want to effectively meet the empathy related needs in society, it is important to extend our view beyond our own conceptions alone and engage all stakeholders in the process (Van Gemert-Pijnen, 2013). Inspiration can be taken from the explorative stages of a *participatory* approach of design, intended to conceptualize initiatives *with* the population instead of *for* the population (Sanders, 2002).

This thesis will focus on exploring the needs behind the call for more empathy in society and possible strategies for addressing these needs. A qualitative, inductive method will be employed in order to explore the topic of empathy by letting the participants of the study speak for themselves, not constricted by the bias of existing conceptualizations, hypothesis or definitions.

Research questions:

- What are the needs behind the call for more empathy in society
- How can these needs be addressed?

## METHOD

### DESIGN

The World Café method (World Café Community Foundation, 2015) is used to engage people from the Dutch population in dialogue with each other as well as record insights from these dialogues. The World Café is a format of meeting that attempts to tap into the collective intelligence of the participants. It is designed in a way that is inclusive and informal, and its purpose is to move participants away from advocating their own ideas, and towards discovering their collective ideas regarding real-life concerns in any community. The World Café is designed to build community and foster and collect collective applicable learning (Steier, Brown & Mesquita da Silva, 2015).

The World Café design has 7 guiding principles (World Café Community Foundation, 2015):

- set the context
- create hospitable space
- explore questions that matter
- encourage everyone's contribution
- listen together for insights
- connect diverse perspectives
- share collective discoveries

The World Café event starts with a very brief introduction setting the context and introducing the questions: “What are the common needs behind the call for more empathy in society?” and “How can these needs be addressed?”. The method itself consists of a series of informal conversations between groups of participants with rotating constitution, followed by a harvesting round where insights and conclusions from these conversations are reported.

### PARTICIPANTS AND RECRUITMENT

The first world Café, held on the University of Twente Campus in Enschede on July 10<sup>th</sup> 2018, has a total of 9 participants (table 1) recruited from inside and outside the student population through various social media and from the researchers extended network.

The second world Café, held in Amsterdam on November 2<sup>nd</sup> 2018, has a total of 14 participants (table 1), recruited through various social media by ‘Nederland Wordt Beter’, a Dutch foundation that aims to contribute to a future without racism and exclusion, from the believe that this can be achieved by recognizing the influence that colonial history and slavery has on contemporary society and on all Dutch people. Since 2012 ‘Nederland Wordt Beter’ also organizes the national "Day of Empathy", to bring people together, to learn about each other's past and present experiences in order to generate more mutual respect and understanding to Dutch society.

Table 1: Demographics of World Café participants.

	<b>Enschede (N=9) 10-07-2018</b>	<b>Amsterdam (N=14) 02-11-2018</b>	<b>Total (N=23)</b>
<b>GENDER</b>			
Man	3	3	6
Woman	6	11	17
Other	0	0	0
<b>AGE</b>			
21-25	2	3	5
26-30	1	2	3
31-35	3	2	5
36-40	1	2	3
41-45	1	0	1
46-50	1	3	4
51-55	0	1	1
(missing)	0	1	1
<b>EDUCATION</b>			
Secondary education	3	1	4
Intermediate vocational education	3	2	5
Higher vocational education	1	5	6
Academic BA	2	4	6
Academic Msc	0	1	1
(missing)	0	1	1

Participants of the world Café are requested to sign an informed consent form. Participants are also asked to fill in a small demographic questionnaire. Participants receive contact information of the researcher.

## PROCEDURE/MATERIALS

The World Café event takes place in a comfortable, Café-like space where participants are seated at tables in groups of 3 or 4 people. Tables have a paper tablecloth and colored crayons are provided for participants to make notes and drawings on the table as a way to record insights as well as stimulate creative thinking.

At the start of the World Café, the researcher introduces the subject and the context of the topic ‘empathy’ briefly. This is done by stating that it is often heard in the media that we need more empathy in society, but that it is not always clear what is meant by this. The World Café is introduced as a way to explore the meaning of this call for empathy through conversation. That is all the context that is given with the intention of not directing the conversations of the participants into any specific direction beyond the setting of the topic and context in order to leave space for participants to express what they find important.

The central open-ended questions “*What are the common needs behind the call for more empathy in society?*” and “*How can these needs be addressed?*” are formulated as well as displayed on a visible place in the room.

The researcher then explains the procedure to the participants: There will be 3 (Enschede) or 4 (Amsterdam) rounds of conversation. After the first round of conversation, one person is asked to remain at the table as “host” for the next round, while the others serve as “ambassadors of meaning” and leave the table to each join a different table. The ambassadors carry ideas, themes and questions into their new conversations, while the host keeps track of the ideas, themes and questions expressed at their table. The host welcomes the participants who joined the table and summarizes the previous conversation for them and then the conversation continues from there. Participants are encouraged to use the tablecloths to write and draw on, as a way to record their ideas This is repeated for three 20-minute rounds in Enschede, and for four 20 minute rounds in Amsterdam.

By having participants move in several rounds of conversation with different people, connections between ideas, questions, and themes should become more visible. After 3 or 4 rounds all the tables in the room are cross-pollinated with insights from other conversations.

After 3 or 4 rounds of conversation there is a round of "harvesting insights and ideas", where the hosts from each table gives a summary of the conversations at their table with additions from other participants. The participants are encouraged to share what seems important to them, without being prompted to answer the research questions. The researcher asks questions to clarify if he understands what participants are expressing, but tries not to influence the focus or the direction of what is reported. This harvesting round is recorded through a voice recorder and provides the data for inductive analysis (World Café Community Foundation, 2015).

## ANALYSIS

The World Café harvesting rounds are fully transcribed from audio recordings, and the transcriptions are analyzed using inductive content analysis (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). The transcripts of both World Café events are initially analyzed separately from each other so that the results can be compared.

First, the transcripts are read and all statements that are expressed by the participants, and regarded as relevant to the topic by the researcher are selected, while phrases without relevance to the topic are omitted from the analysis. This is done by highlighting relevant phrases in the transcript rather than by deleting irrelevant text as this way the context of what was said is more easy to refer back to. Omitted parts of the text mostly consist of repetitions, connecting phrases and statements referring to procedural issues.

For example, the sentence (translated from Dutch) below was expressed by a participant, and the researcher chose to select the highlighted phrases from this statement for further analysis.

*“And it's also very **bad that you need inspiration or examples** for it, to be empathetic yourself, so actually **only when you receive empathy**, or know for yourself, or whatever. Good examples actually, that it then becomes much easier to be empathetic yourself.”*

All these selected phrases are paraphrased if necessary and then categorized according to meaning and theme through an inductive process: no categories are preconceived, instead they emerge from the themes that come up during the World Café events. Concretely this is done by grouping statements together that approximate each other in their meaning, and then naming the category.

For example, the phrases below (translated from Dutch) are grouped together, and words or phrases that show the meaning or theme that defines the category are highlighted.

- **Safety**

- *Safe, manageable world to grow into*

- *If you feel safe you start doing things, if you feel unsafe you often act out of fear.*

- **Openness and transparency**

- *Information is being concealed, otherwise we would revolt more*

These categorized statements are summarized in such a way that the data is manageable, structured and concise, while preserving the meanings and attitudes as they arise from participants statements.

## RESULTS

### WORLD CAFÉ ENSCHEDE

The first World Café is held on the University of Twente Campus in Enschede on July 10<sup>th</sup> 2018, with a total of 9 participants recruited through social media.

#### The meaning of 'empathy'

Not much was explicitly said in this World Café about the **definition of the word Empathy**. What was said about the meaning of the term empathy can be summed up as empathy being either feeling or understanding the emotions of others, and also letting the other person feel that you understand what they are feeling.

#### The needs behind empathy

When asked "**what do we want when we say we want empathy**" several **underlying needs** were mentioned and these can be summarized as **harmony, connection, safety** and **honesty**.

It was explained by participants that they actually wanted to **live in harmony** with themselves, other people, and the ecosystem, and that empathy was a strategy to reach this harmony. In this context, it was also mentioned that living harmoniously does not mean that there is no room for conflict between groups, or individuals, or within oneself, but that conflicts can be handled by asking what is being experienced instead of asking who is right or justified.

It was also stated that the reason they wanted more empathy was because they wanted to **experience more connection** with themselves and others. Connection being more awareness for each other and how we experience the world, but also awareness of the interconnectedness of all things. It was also expressed that empathy reflects a need for **safety**. A safe and manageable world to live in and develop ourselves. In a more empathetic social environment it is easier to do things you want instead of act out of fear. **Honesty and transparency** were also mentioned as underlying needs associated with the call for more empathy, as people generally only feel safe to share their emotions when they feel that the other is honest about their own feelings and intentions.



## Conditions for empathy

On several occasions participants mentioned that **empathy always starts with oneself**. One can empathize with oneself by giving attention to one's own emotions in a nonjudgmental and accepting way.

It was stated that empathy starts with **showing empathy and care towards oneself** because of the interconnected nature of life which was explained in a metaphysical way: we are all one and share the same consciousness. Participants believed that in this way one can directly benefit others by being empathic towards oneself. To be able to be empathetic towards others one needs to first be empathic towards oneself because this is required in order to have the capacity for empathy. To have an understanding and acceptance of the emotions of others **one must first understand and accept one's own emotions**. It was also said that even when wishing to spread empathy in society, it is both necessary and sufficient to be empathic towards oneself. If you have **empathy towards yourself you will automatically be empathic towards others** in your daily contacts, and through this you will have them experience empathy that will help them become more empathic towards themselves and others. This way empathy will spread like an oil slick.

On a relatively abstract level, several more conditions for empathy were discussed, such as **presence**, **non-judgmental acceptance** and **emotional flow**. These prerequisites are closely linked to the idea of starting with yourself. It was stated by several participants that one must be able to **be present with the other person's feelings**, meaning that they should be able to give them their full attention, in order to be empathetic towards them, and that this is not really possible if one needs empathy or attention for their own feelings. This is very closely related to the claim that empathy always starts with oneself. Participants also said that being empathic requires **observing without judgments and assumptions**. One should adopt an inquiring attitude which takes time and patience but is the only way the other can feel heard and accepted. One does not have to agree with the other, but should welcome what they are expressing. Often this is expressed in phrases such as "everything is welcome". It was also argued that **emotional flow**, an awareness of one's own emotions and changes that occur in them, is a condition for empathy. It is possible to be filled with your own emotions while not being aware of this because your attention is elsewhere, and this can block one's capacity to be empathic towards others. Some ways of

connecting to one's own emotions and allowing them to flow are making art, writing and sharing vulnerably with others.

More **concrete conditions or characteristics for empathy** were mentioned less often than the abstract prerequisites mentioned above. The concrete conditions that were brought up were a specific style of **listening and reflecting**, establishing conversations with the **explicit intention** of gaining understanding, and agreeing to **take turns** giving and receiving empathy. **Listening** was mentioned as a fundamental component of being empathetic. To be there and give the other an opportunity to share their experience. Listening emphatically can be done in silence. Empathic listening can also be done by reflecting and checking, which is telling the other person how you understand what they are saying and checking with them if you understand correctly as a way to make the other feel heard. Establishing conversations with the **explicit intention of being empathetic and finding understanding** were mentioned a few times in different contexts, but can simply be understood as setting a place and a time to sit down and listen to each other. Examples that were mentioned were: bringing opposing parties together to give them a chance to hear each other out and creating low threshold places where anyone can step in if they just want to be listened to. **Taking turns in giving and receiving empathy** means setting a time where one person shares and the other listens, and then reversing the roles for a similar amount of time. This was mentioned as a clear way to create balance, and it ties in to the often mentioned point that in order to be empathic towards others, one first needs to receive empathy from others or oneself.

#### Stimulating empathy in society

Participants came up with several ideas for **concrete initiatives that could stimulate more empathy** in society, that were generally aimed at **education, creating spaces** for empathy, and **inviting people** to experience empathy. It was mentioned at every table that starting young and **giving explicit attention to empathy in primary schools** would be an effective way to start. Children would become used to empathy if it got attention in school, and this way empathy would automatically become more present in society. **Creating spaces intended for learning about empathy or receiving empathy** was also said to be a good way of spreading empathy in society. It was mentioned that this should be done in a way that makes it easily available and accessible for as many people as possible. It could be done in familiar places such as community centers and libraries, where the threshold to come in and see what

empathy is about is as low as possible. Participants also emphasized that we can **invite people to learn about and/or receive empathy** and in case of conflict we can **invite opposing groups of people to meet** and hear each other emphatically. In this it seems important that the focus is not on forcing people into any change, but only create accessible opportunities for people to explore empathy if they choose so.

When asked **what we can do to stimulate more empathy in society** there also was explicit **resistance** towards this notion. One participant stated that **'doing' is often a pitfall**, because empathy is about 'being'. Especially so in the current society where speed and efficiency are highly valued. When we feel that we want more empathy, our reaction is often to start doing things to solve this lack of empathy, and this does not work because empathy is about being with what is present without trying to change or fix things. Another participant asked **how empathic it actually is to desire for change outside of yourself**. Is it empathetic to want to use your own energy to penetrate and change the lives of others? When asked more concretely the participant said that the existence of compulsory schooling is not empathic in their eyes as it takes away people's freedom, but that since schools already exist, teaching empathy as part of the curriculum would be no worse than teaching any other subjects. Participants also posed **the question whether anyone has the capacity to be empathic** towards others. It seemed clear to them that society lacks people who are able to show empathy, but they did not know if this was caused by a lack of opportunity, or a lack of ability.

## WORLD CAFÉ AMSTERDAM

The second world Café is held in Amsterdam on November 2<sup>nd</sup> 2018 with a total of 14 participants, promoted through various social media by "Nederland wordt beter", a Dutch foundation that aims to contribute to a future without racism and exclusion from the belief that this can only be achieved by recognizing the influence that colonial history and slavery has on contemporary society and on all Dutch people. "Nederland Wordt Beter" also organizes the national "Day of Empathy" since 2012, to bring people together, to learn about each other's past and present experiences in order to generate more mutual respect and understanding.

### The meaning of 'empathy'

At each table a variation of a description or definition of empathy was formulated:

Table 1: To immerse yourself in someone else's world while being able to temporarily distance yourself from your own ideas and situation.

Table 2: To give the other person the feeling that they are accepted and welcome to give their opinion. And to give the other person the feeling that are heard.

Table 3: Inclusiveness; acceptance; consideration for the other person while also taking care of oneself, effort to understand the other person; openness; equality; asking questions.

Table 4: Commonality; compassion; being curious; to be there for someone; that you wonder what motivates others to behave in certain ways.

### The needs behind empathy

Participants also asked **if empathy is sufficient?** Can people stop once they experience empathy for others, or does empathy warrant an action to follow it? Participants agreed that empathy can be enough on an individual level. but in a societal context it is often important that there is a kind of solution. This idea was expressed by the phrase: “Sometimes after empathy there must be action: Solidarity.”

### Conditions for empathy

The participants brought up multiple factors said to be instrumental for empathy:

**Inquisitiveness about others**, and an ability to **temporarily let go of one’s own ideas** while empathizing with someone else, are the most salient conditions for being able to empathize described by the World Café participants.

Inquisitiveness about others while letting go of one’s own assumptions includes: being curious about what moves the other person’s actions; being curious about one’s own blind spots; being curious whether one’s stereotypical image of a particular group is correct; and a willingness to engage in a constant learning process.

**Self-care** was repeatedly emphasized as being a crucial part of the process of empathy. To really create space to empathize with someone else it helps if one is aware of their own needs and capable of setting clear boundaries. **Self-reflection** was also repeatedly brought up as a necessary factor for empathy. Empathy requires the realization that everyone, including oneself, has their own baggage and a

different frame of reference, and responds differently from there. It was also postulated that one is most empathic at times when one realizes that one is not empathic all the time.

Linked to self-reflection, **vulnerability** was also said to be an important prerequisite for empathy. Knowing and admitting things that one feels insecure and ashamed about, and that one still has things to learn about oneself, makes it possible to empathize with others. Participants also expressed how being vulnerable is challenging as it can be in conflict with the competitive spirit that is quite prevalent in modern western society.

Another factor that participants repeatedly expressed is **intention**. Empathy must really come from within, and often empathy is only possible if one has the willingness to take the step to empathize with someone, to explicitly put effort into seeing the other person and how they experience something. This particular factor is expected to vary significantly within an individual depending on context.

**Information about others** can also be an important factor that promotes empathy, especially regarding people who belong to groups other than one's own. One-sided information received from authority figures about groups of people is often accepted as true when no other information is available. More comprehensive information about others' living conditions and experiences increases one's capacity to empathize.

The World Café participants also mentioned several more situational factors that are thought to promote empathy. The importance of having **examples of empathy** came up repeatedly: When one realizes the benefits of empathy by experiencing it themselves or observing it, one will likely become more willing to empathize with others. **Life experience** was also mentioned, as it is expected that people who have experienced more will also experience more empathy for others (while the stereotype of people becoming more stubborn with age contradicts this). **Living in small communities** was also mentioned as a factor that promotes empathy as knowing each other and having less competition and more opportunities to feel unique can help people to feel more empathy towards others in their community. Small communities often do have less diversity than bigger communities, which makes it more difficult to talk about the experience of other groups (i.e. regarding racial issues) because then the conversation is very one-sided.

The World Café participants expressed different issues regarding the limitations of empathy. A prominent question in the dialogue about empathy is whether people can experience empathy towards anyone. Participants note that it is particularly **difficult to experience empathy towards individuals who do not express much empathy** for others, and that this will likely results in a vicious circle where individuals who do not easily express empathy will be unlikely to receive the empathy that might be needed to make them more empathetic. A related question that comes up is whether it is realistic to motivate people who have a lot of privileges, who actually do not themselves experience the type of problems that require help or empathy, to become more empathetic towards others.

Participants also ask if there are forces that oppose empathy. It was mentioned that the individualistic competitive nature of modern western society actively moves people away from developing their natural ability to empathize. It was also stated that the information people receive through education and through the media tends to be one-sided and often does not include information about the experiences of members of other groups. Another example is the statement by a participant that empathy is diminished by capitalism, “where, for example, progressive people buy products that include child labor, without thinking. Activism is then necessary for empathy.” (note: not said in the context of direct anti-capitalism activism, but in examples of creating awareness and promoting positive and empathetic change in society. Example given: Kick Out Zwarte Piet.)

Additionally, participants also ask whether empathy is genetically determined or is a skill that can be learned. Participants are not clear on how much genetic diversity there is, but are convinced that most people can learn to be more empathic at least to some extent.

### Stimulating empathy in society

A question that participants explicitly label as difficult is the question of what it takes to stimulate empathy. Participants ask if stimulating empathy requires action or if examples can be enough. There were many ideas about triggers for empathy among participants, but it was also clearly pointed out that they do not have a clear answer to the question what is actually required to meet the need for more empathy in society.

## CONCRETE IDEAS FROM BOTH WORLD CAFÉ'S

Concrete initiatives that could stimulate more empathy in society were discussed in both World Café events. As the initiatives showed significant overlap across both events, they will be summarized here together.

The initiatives for promoting more empathy in society can be divided into 4 categories: **Education, Representation, Safe Spaces** and **Mediation**.

### Education

One thought that was very salient in both World Cafés was the importance of starting young, and that schools can play a crucial role in stimulating empathy. It was argued that having an explicit “empathy class” in which students learn about tools for communicating about emotions, such as Nonviolent Communication, are a straightforward way to teach young people empathy related skills.

Representation, creating safe spaces, and mediation, can all be applied in schools to contribute to the integration of empathy education in schools.

Education about empathy can also be offered to adults, in the form of courses or workshops, or as videos or text. In contrast to offering empathy education in schools, educational efforts aimed at adults will likely only reach people who are already motivated to learn about empathy.

*Existing example: Nonviolent communication is a teachable style of communicating that focuses on expressing feelings and needs in such a way that makes it easier for people to empathize, as well as empathizing with others. A few participants in both World Cafés brought up Nonviolent Communication.*

### Representation

It was also argued that relatively small interventions in schools can stimulate empathy. A concrete intervention would be to use teaching material that students can personally relate to because there is some resemblance to their own daily life by learning about the lives of others who are living in different conditions than oneself. An example was incorporating Anne Frank's diary when teaching

about the second world war so that young students can learn to relate to how the war was experienced as opposed to learning only the facts.

Another concrete intervention that is applicable in schools is the creation of opportunities to meet people from minority groups and interact with them. An example of this that was discussed was having students meet and interact with people who fit within the LHBTi category, as this is expected to be a normalizing and humanizing experience which will stimulate empathy for members of minority groups.

Representation also applies outside the context of schools, and this was most obviously discussed in the context of the media. Both in the way the news is represented in mainstream media, and the way fictional stories are told, it is often done from the perspective of the dominant group, which creates stories that do not do justice to everyone's experience.

*Existing Example: Lentekriebels (Spring-tickles) is a Dutch project week in primary education during which participating schools teach about resilience, relationships and sexuality. A parent who participated in the World Café shared his experience that his children did not find LHBTi surprising after having participated in Spring-tickles program.*

### Safe spaces

One concrete factor that was argued to be crucial for empathy was the availability of safe spaces where people can express themselves in relative safety. Some participants argued that just a space where the intention is set to listen to each others will make a significant difference when contrasted to public spaces such as the streets and the Internet where the sense of broadcasting and defending ones own perspective in opposition to other perspectives is often preeminent. Having a structure to how people communicate in such a space is beneficial as this ensures that everybody feels that they will have an opportunity to be heard themselves, which in turn is expected to give them more motivation to listen to others.

### Mediation

Closely related to the creation of spaces where people can connect empathetically, is making sure that people are available who can mediate between individuals or groups. Mediation that fosters more empathy was mentioned to range between neutrally dividing the time ensuring all parties get equal



opportunities to express themselves, to actively translating more judgmental expressions into more experiential expressions to make it possible for the receiving party to accept a message as the other's experience.

*Existing example: The Keti Koti dialogue table is a mediated dialogue focused on exchanging stories and experiences between racial groups and also addressing the history between the groups. A World Café participant shared her experience of being surprised and touched by the shocking stories of white Dutch people, who themselves were also shocked by the stories of others.*

## DISCUSSION

The world Café events are intended to explore the following research questions:

- What are the common needs behind the call for more empathy in society?
- How can these needs be addressed?

The world Café events are set up to explore the concept of empathy inductively, which leaves researchers with very limited direct control on the direction of the conversations held between participants (Thomas, 2003), and the extent to which the research questions are addressed. (This will be expanded on in the paragraph: *Limitations of the study and suggestions for future research*.) This is already illustrated by how the two World Café events analyzed in this thesis show a distinct difference in how the first research question, about the needs behind the call for more empathy, was addressed. In Enschede the needs behind empathy were intentionally explored at each table, while in Amsterdam participants largely omitted an explicit exploration of the needs and instead focused primarily on talking about strategies and conditions for empathy. Participants collectively decided where to take the conversation after being introduced to the research questions and the results of this study provide a sample of the attitudes and ideas that are expressed in conversation without much external input.

### **What are the common needs behind the call for more empathy?**

During the World Café events, several insights about the needs behind empathy were reported by the participants. There is variation in the way empathy and the underlying needs are approached in the World Cafés, depending on the context or level at which empathy is being discussed. When wanting to address a problem, context is an important factor to include in the exploration of the problem (Van Gemert-Pijnen, 2013; Sanders, 2002). In order to address this variation, the needs are categorized according to levels, such as social, spiritual, relational and individual level.

#### *Social level*

Empathy is predominantly mentioned on a social level in terms of existing tensions between different groups based on ethnic, socioeconomic, ideological and historical factors. In this context empathy is thought of as a tool to stimulate more mutual understanding about the experiences and conditions of people with different backgrounds. In the Amsterdam World Café this was mainly expressed in terms of

social change regarding multicultural issues, while in the Enschede World Café more emphasis was put on social change regarding personal freedom and environmental issues. In both events it was explicitly expressed that on a social level the needs behind the call for empathy extend beyond empathy alone. Representation of diverse stories in media and education, and facilitation of empathic dialogue between opposing groups on specific issue are the most mentioned strategies for meeting empathy related needs on a social level.

On the social level empathy is also expressed as important to the conservation of humanistic values such as agency, equality and autonomy in a society in which our ability to manipulate our environment and each other is steadily increasing. Carl Rogers (1959) similarly argued that empathy has a quality of safeguarding the autonomy and the agency of human beings in a society where an increase of expert knowledge on how the behavioral and cognitive processes of individuals can be manipulated without conscious consent (in expert-driven psychotherapy, but also in other fields such as marketing) does put pressure on these humanistic values.

Interestingly, on the social level empathy was mostly discussed from the perspective of the receiver of empathy, for example when “empathy” is said to mean “feeling understood by others”. In this perspective of the receiver of empathy it is stated that the needs behind empathy on this level are linked to a lack of empathy in specific groups towards other specific groups due to factors such as privilege and ignorance. This is in contrast with the other levels in which empathy was discussed such as the interpersonal and individual level, in which the perspective varies throughout the discussion and in which there is explicit emphasis on the importance of balance between giving and receiving empathy. This is also in contrast with the examples of social rhetorics that were briefly discussed in the introduction of this thesis where it is generally emphasized th

On the level of the more local community the needs are discussed in terms of being aware of the experiences of others in the community. Empathy was described from different perspectives on this level: feeling understood and considered by others in the community; learning new information (contradicting stereotypical assumptions) by getting to know others, and facilitating empathy in the community. The most mentioned strategy to meet needs on the local level, is to create safe spaces for people to engage with each other and have facilitated dialogues in which people can share about their experiences and needs. Safe spaces and facilitated dialogue have also been suggested by David van Reybrouck (2017) as a strategy for stimulating empathy in local communities. Examples of such

facilitated dialogues can be found in nonviolent communication (Rosenberg, 2004) and restorative practices (Zehr, 2002).

### *Relationship level*

Empathy on the interpersonal or relationship level is discussed in the World Café's, yet the underlying needs are not explicitly explored to the same level as the social level, presumably resulting from the topic of the events was framed as regarding empathy on a social scale to begin with. The need for intimacy, honesty and safety were mentioned when exploring empathy in close relationships, and an emphasis was put on the need for balance and equality regarding empathy in close relationships. The perspectives taken here vary between receiving empathy, experiencing/communicating empathy and facilitating empathy, suggesting that there is more explicit awareness of their being different perspectives involved in the process on the level of close relationships than on other levels where one perspective seems to take advantage over the others.

### *Individual level*

Empathy on the individual level, often framed as the importance of empathy for oneself, is explored as a prerequisite for gaining the capacity to empathize with others, and also as a fundamental need itself. Self-empathy is argued to be a requirement for empathy with others as this provides a clarity on one's own emotional processes, which helps to understand and empathize with the emotions expressed by others. Self-empathy is also important as the resulting understanding of one's own limitations is argued to increase one's capacity for empathy, and the resulting attention for one's own emotions is thought to create space for empathizing with the emotions and experiences of others as well as a means to process them. The importance of self-empathy as a need in itself is sometimes expressed in the context of how one should not expect or demand empathy from other people, which suggests an underlying need for self-reliance. As the whole process of self-empathy is contained within one individual the perspective taken here is simultaneously that of receiver, experiencer and facilitator of empathy.

The concept of empathy being directed to oneself is in contrast with the various definitions of empathy in research, literature and philosophy (e.g. Batson, 2009; Stein, 1989) in which empathy is explicitly intended to describe the process of relating to the experience of others. Awareness of one's own emotions and the ability to distinguish between one's own feelings and the feelings of others is theorized to be an important component of empathy as a way to regulate personal distress as one relates to others suffering (Decety & Lamm, 2011) a process that is very similar to that which participants described as empathy for oneself. The concept of self-empathy as a component of empathy is also common in practices that incorporate empathy such as Nonviolent Communication (Rosenberg, 2004). Self-empathy was also mentioned by participants as a need in itself, not related to empathy for others, which would make it indistinguishable from the concept of self-compassion. Self-compassion (Neff, 2003) is a way of relating to ourselves in times of suffering through kindness and acceptance, and has been consistently linked with positive mental health in recent research (Bluth & Neff, 2018). World Café participants expressed needs that they related to empathy which can be regarded as a call for more self-compassion.

Some needs expressed on different levels appear to be in conflict with each other. Statements on empathy not being enough in itself on a social level express that people do not exclusively want empathy, but they want additional things such as action, change and solidarity (implying agreement with their perspective) to happen as a result of empathy. It seems that this is in conflict with the concept of empathy on an individual or interpersonal level where it is explicitly described as being a way of receiving the experience of others as it is without an expectation of having to agree with or act on what is shared. People who have clear needs that are not being met in a given situation, will expectedly express that they wish for this situation to change, and that empathy alone is not likely to transform their conditions. Yet it is expected to be hard to empathize when there is an awareness that any empathy and understanding one expresses could build up expectations that one assumes responsibility to take action. It is expected that people will be more guarded to show empathy when they feel that expressing empathy might create expectations for agreement and subsequent action. Research suggests that people are much more likely to take action towards improving the situation of others when they experience empathy towards these others (Batson, Chang, Orr & Rowland, 2002; Segal, 2011). Pavey, Greitemeyer & Sparks (2012) found that empathy specifically increases autonomously motivated action. Empathy

can be expected to increase social action, but expressing this expectation for social action might actually decrease empathic motivation.

Another example of conflicting meanings contained in the term ‘empathy’ is the perspective taken when exploring empathy. It is arguably impossible to truly describe something which, in some conceptions, can only be known through experiencing it directly. Yet it is possible to narrow the definition down by at least identifying who is experiencing it. In the case of empathy there is confusion over this, which creates room for disagreement over whether an empathic interaction has occurred between a receiver of empathy judging whether he experiences feeling understood, and an experiencer of empathy judging whether he experiences empathic understanding.

The question of what the actual needs behind the call for more empathy in society are provides numerous answers in the form of statements that apply to different contexts and to different meanings of “empathy”, and these different statements can appear to be in conflict with each other. It follows that a clear unifying answer to the first research question does not emerge from the World Café events. The current inductive analysis does offer some insight on why the question is so hard to answer. In the introduction of this thesis it is suggested that focusing on the abstract definition of the word might actually decrease our understanding of the basic characteristic of human life it is intended to describe and the basic human needs it is intended to address. In contrast, the World Café analysis implies that the actual needs behind the call for empathy could possibly be more effectively addressed if we had access to a more clearly defined and commonly accepted terminology when talking about how we relate to each others experience as empathy is a concept that proves flexible and fuzzy in research, and literature as well as in daily use.

### **How can these needs be addressed?**

Numerous concrete and applicable ideas, initiatives and interventions were reported in the World Café events, and they are described in the results section. There was a lot of overlap between the suggestions from both events. It was also explicitly pointed out by participants that they do not have the answer to the question of what is actually required to stimulate empathy or meet their empathy related needs. There was a clear emphasis on the importance of empathy in education in several forms and on the

importance of providing safe places where people can go when they want someone to listen to them or to support them to reach understanding in a conflict.

There was a general consensus among participants that initiatives can be set up that help stimulate more empathy in society, and that these are expected to benefit wellbeing within society. Research in Positive Psychology, a contemporary field of psychology which studies the different factors that enable individuals as well as communities to thrive (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014), has shown that numerous interventions aimed at cultivating strengths and positive experiences can increase wellbeing in individuals as well as mitigate or prevent psychopathology (Weiss, Westerhof, & Bohlmeijer, 2016). Therefore it is expected that interventions inspired by Positive psychology that aim to increase empathy, could have a positive effect on psychological and social well-being.

When addressing social tension, participants expressed a clear emphasis on creating dialogue between groups. When the objective of an empathy related dialogue is restoring peace or understanding regarding a certain event or situation involving distinct parties, equal representation of perspectives is essential. The Keti Koti dialogue table (Dibbitts & Willemsen, 2014), for example, is a mediated dialogue with ritual elements designed by Mercedes Zandwijken focused on exchanging stories and experiences and also addressing the slavery history shared by black Dutch people and white Dutch people. Similarly, Restorative justice (Zehr, 2002) applies empathy as a way to bring understanding and peace between victims and offenders of an act of violence. Initiatives such as these which attempt to focus on restoring the peace can only be successful if both distinct groups are equally represented.

Existing empathic practices were often mentioned by World Café participants, as all around the world, empathy is already explicitly being applied by groups and individuals who are trying to build towards a more empathic society. Such applications of empathy exist in many forms and on different scales and are often integrated with other practices. Some existing practices that are reported to be beneficial for the promotion of empathy are: Sociocracy which integrates empathy with decision making methods in order to create self-organizing systems in which every voice is equally taken into account (Buck & Endenburg, 2012). Nonviolent Communication (Rosenberg 2004), a communication method that aims to resolve conflicts and build understanding, honesty and connection, combines empathy with a needs-

focused cognitive framework. When considering interventions aimed at stimulating empathy in a community such practices can be incorporated as a source of inspiration and content.

Interventions that focus on developing people's ability to empathize as they are designed and studied in social-scientific literature (Weisz & Zaki, 2017) are not brought up by the World Café participants.

These interventions focus more on actually building the skills necessary for experiencing and expressing empathy effectively, often in simulated conditions (Weisz & Zaki, 2017). In contrast: the initiatives that World Café participants bring up are predominantly focused on creating opportunities for learning more about the lives and experiences of other people. Compared to the literature, increasing social opportunities for getting to know each other are prioritized over increasing cognitive skills related to empathic capacity.

The current study also provides insight into ways in which the flexible and fuzzy nature of the concept 'empathy' can lead to confusion and distraction from the actual underlying needs. This suggests that meeting the needs behind the call for empathy requires a more clearly defined and uniformly understandable use of language, especially in social rhetoric, where imprecise words linked to ideological concepts, such as democracy and justice, and also empathy, are rarely defined, and can be kept ambiguous for political reasons (Gastil, 1992). In order to reshape our language regarding "empathy", process-oriented approaches of languages such as the General Semantics of Alfred Korzybsky (1933) can be consulted. Korzybsky (1933) applied mathematical logic to analyze the way our language shapes our reality, and how we are misled by our language to make statements about "what things are" instead of "how things are perceived by us". His most famous credo "the map is not the territory" illustrates this idea. We all build our own models of reality through our unique experiences, but these models never *are* reality. General Semantics encourages us to communicate on the level of "how things are perceived" and not "what things are", which is more rational in the light of Korzybsky's General Semantics as nothing can really be said to "be true" about an objective reality when nobody has access to all the information. Talking about how things are perceived, experienced and interpreted rather than what they are can be expected to diminish conflict and confusion (Wilson, 1990). This approach to language can be applied to more clearly describe the experiential processes involved in empathy and identify strategies for meeting the underlying needs. A simple example of this would be that instead of saying "I think you are not empathetic" one could say "I do not think you are



aware of what I am feeling right now” as a way of communicating the situation and the underlying needs more clearly.

### **Limitations of the study and suggestions for future research**

The World Café events are executed and analyzed inductively. During the events the research questions were clearly stated to be the topic of the World Café, and the questions were displayed visibly on the wall during the whole event, but participants were free to talk about anything without further direct influence from the researcher. During the final harvesting round the participants were free to report what they wanted, and the reported statements were analyzed inductively. This methodology provides insight into the attitudes and ideas of the participants that come up in conversation, but it also leaves researchers without tools to ensure that the intended research questions are addressed (Thomas, 2003).

In this study, which can be used as a model for initiating dialogue and generating ideas within communities about empathy and countless other subjects, the World Café events proved to engage people in dialogue about empathy. The current analysis suggests that the World Café is particularly useful for generating ideas and for engaging people. It also suggests that the World Café is a highly exploratory and qualitative tool and researchers should keep in mind that results are influenced by the context in which the topic is framed and that the results from the World Café cannot be taken as an exhaustive or even uncontroversial representation of all perspectives held within the population.

#### *Framing of the topic*

Rather than addressing a broad concept as done in the current empathy World Café events, World Café's are expected to generate more concrete ideas and views when framing the topic of dialogue in terms of more specific situations or events. During the process of designing any initiative aimed at facilitating or stimulating empathy it could be especially useful to invite members from the target community to engage with the designers in a World Café event. It can, for example, be expected that a World Café about empathy organized in schools with the schools' students as participants will be more focused on empathy in the context of the school environment. This would assumable result in specific and applicable ideas and critiques, as well as the students feeling included and engaged.

### *Representation*

Specifically the participants for the world Café in Amsterdam are recruited through the network of the foundation “Nederland Wordt Beter”, a foundation that partially focuses on racism and inclusion in Dutch society. It seems reasonable to assume that this leads to an over-representation of the participants with a relatively high affinity for issues and perspectives from minority groups relative to the population. The world Café is designed to include all voices and tap into the collective intelligence of those present, but some perspectives will always be absent. One example is that while exploring the limits of empathy it is expressed that other (i.e. more privileged) groups are sometimes assumed to be less empathic and therefor experienced as more difficult to empathize with. It is not hard to imagine that the other party might act from similar assumptions, and that conversations including these other groups would lead to different conclusions that synthesize these assumptions into new shared insights. Even when participants are recruited broadly from the population, the thoughts expressed are not expected to unveil a representative synthesis or even an unbiased consensus of all perspectives held in the population. The informal and free design of the World Café method generates results that are flexible, unpredictable and biased, and can be applied as a generative and exploratory tool as long as researchers are conscious of its limitations.

The setup of this study was exploratory and qualitative by design, and therefor has all the limitations of qualitative research (Atieno, 2009). The results and conclusions cannot be generalized to wider populations for several reasons: they are influenced by the researcher’s interpretation of ambiguous language; the conditions are not controlled; the data is not quantified and as such allows no calculation of its statistical significance.

The extent and nature of bias in the World Café results are unclear, but could be explored in future research by comparing the results of several identically executed World Café’s and exploring their variability.

One aspect that could improve external validity of future World Café events is to, randomly or selectively, recruit participants who are reasonably expected to represent different perspectives within the population. This could be particularly important when the World Café addresses issues on which it is expected that different groups might hold conflicting views.

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