

TOWARDS AN INTEGRATIVE APPROACH TO EMPATHY: REFLECTION ON AFRICANIST PERSPECTIVES TO INTERPERSONAL UNDERSTANDING

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Abstract

The cognition of other minds otherwise termed the problem of interpersonal understanding remains one of the most contentious epistemological problems with regards to social relations. Although many philosophers have attempted to address this problem, they have not been successful because each of them had examined the problem of interpersonal understanding from limited perspectives. This paper puts forward the Integrative Approach as a more viable alternative to addressing the problem of interpersonal understanding. The qualitative research methodology is engaged, employing the Consensual Theory of social relations as Theoretical Framework. The significance of this study lies on its re-interpretation of Husserl's theory of intersubjectivity in the light of Consensual Theory of interpersonal relations. The cardinal findings of the paper is that, Integrative Approach, premised on the principles of African metaphysics and epistemology, enables the Other to easily interact, intermingle, and interpenetrate the Other in an inseparable continuum. By this endeavour, a major contribution to knowledge fostered in this paper is the development of an Integrative Approach enriched by an African epistemological perspective, which encapsulates the many dimensions by which interpersonal understanding can occur beyond the limited treatment of empathy as conceived by Husserl. The study recommends the Integrative Approach as a new model of empathy, which covers the varieties of abilities, skills and strategies that we employ in order to understand and make sense of other thoughts.

Keywords: Interpersonal Understanding; Epistemology; Empathy Phenomenology; Integrative Approach.

Introduction

The integrative approach is a multifaceted approach developed to adequately address the complexity of issues involved in the problem of interpersonal understanding. This paper unveils the *integrative approach* as a more appropriate, and more veritable solution to the problem of interpersonal understanding. It provides justification for the integrative approach as the much desired multidimensional approach to empathy and its relevance to our contemporary society. It essentially demonstrates its importance to the society at the individual, communal, corporate and governmental levels.

The Integrative Approach

The *Integrative Approach* is a model of empathy which can be defined as *a basic form of intentionality that is directed towards the experience of others through consensus and face-to-*

face encounter. It is a model of empathy; an African phenomenological approach by which an understanding of the Other is pursued through consensus and face-to-face encounter. The idea of integrative approach is to create a multidimensional and multifaceted perspective of understanding the Other.

The integrative approach is an Africanist contribution to the debate on the problem of interpersonal understanding. In the African social experience, there is already the element of the *integrative approach* to interpersonal understanding. The communalistic living of the African social system whereby the economic burden of the society is collectively borne has been documented variously by Julius Nyerere in his *Ujamaa* (1968). This integrative approach is also found in the consensual democracy, which Kwasi Wiredu (2013) ascribes to the traditional African political system. In consensual democracy of the genuine African sense, Wiredu tells us that decision making and policies for the running of the society are made in a manner that requires a holistic presentation of views and a patient and empathic resolution of conflict and settling of differences. The African concept of interpersonal understanding which according to Senghor (1964) requires the totality of one's being in the act of cognition, is also integrative. It is integrative in the sense that it transcends the narrowness of Husserlian empathy and distance-creation in the relationship, and instead entails a complete immersion of one's heart, will, soul, emotion, commitment and action in the act of cognition.

There is a correlation between this genuine African philosophy of otherness and the phenomenological *integrative approach* adopted in this paper. Just as African ontological and epistemological doctrines posit and promote the idea of relational activities whereby persons come to understand the other through consensus and dialogue, and with reference to the community, the *integrative approach* also posits a concept of otherness and interpersonal understanding that is rooted in reciprocity and a holistic appreciation of the other in his or her own respect. The *integrative approach* also finds expression in Okoro's "Integrative Metaphysics"¹ and Azenabor's "Holistic Ontology"². In this sense, the *integrative approach* allows one to go into the African metaphysics and epistemology to draw the principle of complementarity, principle of duality and synthesis of human knowledge to enhance interpersonal understanding. It is a symbiosis that will enable us to combine the various approaches to address the complexity of issues involved in interpersonal understanding. It is a movement from a monistic point of view to a pluriversal one.

Contrary to the trending misconception that interpersonal understanding is a gathering of views or opinions, the *Integrative Approach* is not mere consensus, where consensus is viewed as agreement in the loose-sense of the term. By consensus, the *integrative approach* entails an activated process of communicative action and mechanism that results in understanding. In this

¹ Chiedozie Okoro, "The Notion of Integrative Metaphysics and its Relevance to Contemporary World Order", *Integrative Humanism Journal*, Volume One, Number Two, Cape Coast: Department of Classics and Philosophy, University of Cape Coast, (2011), 3-10.

² Godwin Azenabor, *Modern Theories in African Philosophy*, (Lagos: Byolah Publishers, 2010), 79.

sense, it is not only a cognitive activity, but also a genuine moral action emanating from a person's conviction. It is an attitude of mind that expresses the willingness to act. Thus, the *integrative approach* is a moral activity. This is where it is different from the Husserlian proposal, for it does not follow that agreement would lead to the type of consensus implied by the integrative approach, that is, understanding. To understand is to be convinced and to act according to what one knows. It is action that justifies agreement in the *Integrative Approach*.

This position is similar to the conditions proposed by Aristotle for an action to be construed as a moral action, namely, the excellence of intelligence and excellence of character. The *Integrative Approach* also bears some similarity to Habermas' *Discourse Ethics*. Like these two positions mentioned above, the *integrative approach* considers the pivotal role of the will. The prerogative of understanding lies in the exercise of the will. In other words, conviction or the settling of differences is effected only in virtue of the will. Moreover, consensus is a continuous process rather than a fleeting, sporadic exercise to solve problem. This is especially true because conflicts, tensions and misunderstandings emanate from encounters in everyday experiences; and with time come new experiences. To this end, there is no question of a consensus taking place without arriving at understanding. Unlike mere agreement, consensus genuinely thrashes out differences through genuine openness and committed result-oriented group encounter geared towards problem-solving.

Metaphysico-Ontological and Epistemological basis of Integrative Approach

The *Integrative Approach* could be described as an African theory of mind. It is an African theory of intersubjectivity. The integrative approach is a theory of consensus, where consensus means intersubjectivity. "Consensus is a compromise based on willingness, understanding, and agreement"³. It is an African account of the ability to predict, interpret, and explain behaviour in terms of mental states of the other. African Metaphysics as the principle of unity, allows the integrative approach to draw the principle of complementarity to combine the various approaches to enhance interpersonal understanding⁴. The various phenomenological approaches failed to resolve the problem of interpersonal understanding because phenomenologists have approached the problem from only one or two perspective at the expense of the others. Whereas, in his "Holistic Ontology", Azenabor has argued that the style of African philosophy is multi-dimensional, and does not take in only one idea of truth or philosophical development, rather, it takes into cognizance a blend of various philosophical systems.⁵

Leopold Sedar Senghor's work, *On African Socialism* (1964), also addresses the issue of Otherness and interpersonal understanding from the perspective of African ontology. Drawing inspiration from the celebrated work of Placid Tempels who first proposed the "hypothesis" of

³ Ibid, 163.

⁴ Okoro, 4-5.

⁵ Azenabor, 81.

an African philosophy built on "vital force", Senghor explains the concept of Negritude, the basis of the African mode of knowing as "reason by embrace". In his famous parody of the Cartesian dictum *cogito ergo sum*, Senghor extols the African concept of interpersonal understanding and relational activity as "I dance the Other, therefore I am"⁶ This relational activity should not be misconstrued as a non-rational or illogical activity. Rather it is relational activity or epistemological act, which requires the totality of one's being in the act of cognition. It transcends the narrow prescription of Husserlian empathy. It elevates the act of interpersonal understanding beyond the knowledge of essences of the Other. Understanding by this proposal is a wholesome activity of the human person. In his article, "Senghor, or the Holy Grail of Otherness", Messay Kebebe reiterates this position when he submits that Senghor's treatment of Otherness chose to rehabilitate the African person by inventing the infirmities attached to the African race into positive characteristics.⁷

Beyond the ideological consequences of the Senghorian proposal, Francis Mangena puts forward an African concept of interpersonal understanding known as the *Hunhu/Ubuntu* concept in African philosophy. In his work, "*Hunhu/Ubuntu* in the Traditional Thought of South Africa" (2016), Mangena argues that the *Huntu/Ubuntu* traditional African concept is a relational activity whereby persons come to understand the other through consensus and dialogue. As a principle of interpersonal understanding, *Huntu/Ubuntu* seeks to know the Other in relation to the community or the collective.⁸ It is distinguished from the Husserlian position in that it considers the effect of the community in the knowing subject.

Whilst Kwame Anthony Appiah deviates from the cultural and political problematic of Negritude, his theory of Cosmopolitanism as a social epistemology of today's globalised world is equally instructive to the African. In his work, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (2007), Appiah injects some moral doses into the act of interpersonal understanding. He posits that human beings can know and affect each other because there are similar shareable biological and social characteristics that inform common values in all people. The commonness amongst people may be said to be centrifugal in that it is Other-Oriented. It compels us to reach out to the Other. By this token, cosmopolitanism as a social epistemology and principle of interpersonal understanding entails according to Appiah (i) an obligation to people outside our circle, (ii) interests in the lives, concerns, and beliefs of the Other.⁹

Importance of Integrative Approach

Empathy as a cognitive process of experiencing the beliefs, feelings, attitudes or behaviours of others, is an important element in understanding and maintaining harmonious interpersonal

⁶ Leopold Senghor, *On African Socialism*, Trans. Merc Cook, (London: Paul Mall, 1964), 72

⁷ Messay Kebebe, "Senghor, Or, The Holy Grail of Otherness", Olufemi Taiwo, (ed), *Journal on African Philosophy*, No. 11, (1964), 43-59.

⁸ F Mangena, "Huntu/Ubuntu" in the Traditional Thought of South Africa, *Internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, <http://iep.utm.edu/huntu>, accessed 23/06/2024.

⁹ Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Co, 2007)

relationship. Although, many thinkers had drawn attention to the problem of human relationship long before the present century, contemporary philosophy has witnessed a growing interest in the problem of interpersonal understanding and human relationships. In fact, Plato and Aristotle had long maintained the fact that man is a social animal and a communal being. Today, preoccupation with the problems of interpersonal understanding and human relationship has become an important characteristic of contemporary philosophy. In English vocabulary, the word “understanding” has come to mean “knowledge of” or “ability to comprehend” something. For example, one of the goals of science is understanding, that is, understanding objects and the results of their manipulations.¹⁰ This is not the kind of understanding we refer to when we use the word in social cognition. Here we are concerned with the ability to attribute mental states to others, to interpret, predict and explain behaviour in terms of intentions beliefs and desires.

In considering the relevance of empathy to the society, Husserl had maintained that the elementary act of social life is communication. “Sociability constitutes itself through the specifically social, that is, through communicative acts”.¹¹ Communicative acts are acts that are addressed to the other, in which the other is conscious as the one to whom I address myself; [acts] that include in themselves the consciousness that the other understand what I say and that he will orient his behavior to it, that he will reply with actions, and so on. These are the acts that establish a higher unity of consciousness between the person and the person and which relate to the thing-world as a common world of judgement, will, and valuations. In so far as the world has this relation, it has the character of social world, a world endowed with spiritual meaning.¹²

Infusing the existential components of the *integrative approach* into the above submissions by Husserl, it becomes apparent that interpersonal communication is the elementary act of social life, and drawing from the principles of consensus and complementarity, we can progressively build up the larger interconnections of mind, which lead from the dyad to the family, from the family to the community, from the community to the state, and from there to intercultural communication among societies and humanity as such.

The *Integrative Empathy* could be employed as one of the most effective tools at our disposal to change from a selfish frame of thinking to a selfless frame, where our underlying mode of thought is structured by a concern not only for oneself but also for others. Self interest frame which is characteristic of the Western societies is gradually dominating the world. Almost the entire world has inherited the hyper-individualism of free market ideology and consumer

¹⁰ C. H. Patterson, *The Therapeutic Relationship*, (Monterey Calif: Books and Cole, 1985), 52

¹¹ Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy, Second Book: Studies in the Phenomenology of Constitution*. Translated by Richard Rojcewicz and André Schuwer. Collected Works: Volume 3. (The Hague, Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1989), 194.

¹² Edmund Husserl, *First Philosophy, (1923-24), Second Part: Theory of Phenomenological Reductions*, Edited by, Rudolf Boehm, (The Hague, Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff, 1959), 12.

culture that characterized twentieth century capitalism. Indeed, if we actually want people to take practical action on issues such as poverty in developing countries, then it is very essential that we promote integrative empathy, since it helps transform people's worldviews at the deepest level.

The import of the integrative empathy here is that, there is the need to instigate a cultural shift from extrinsic to intrinsic values, where our personal identity and wellbeing is based much more on the quality of our relationships and sense of community engagement than on individual accomplishment or pleasure. If we want this to happen, we must create a sense of empathy in everyday life, since empathy as defined by this study underpins intrinsic values based on relationships. Empathy in this case serves as the ultimate social glue that bonds us to others.

The description of empathy as the ability to interpret, predict and explain behaviour in terms of mental states is also understood as that which enables us to recognize the feelings and needs of others. However, too often an emotional outpouring of sympathy and compassion leads to social action that doesn't meet the essential requirements of those in need. This explains why sometimes politicians and government agencies provide certain social services to the people when what the people actually need is something different. For example, well-meaning individuals and institutions might donate fairly-used clothing, blankets and shoes to communities that have been ravaged by natural disasters such as floods, mudslides or earthquakes, when what the victims really need is sanitation provision or trauma counseling. In other words, there has been a failure to interpret their needs. The failure to understand the perspectives of the Other has been at the root of prejudice, exploitation and violence. Empathy using the integrative approach equips us with the ability to understand the feelings and needs of others, so we become finely attuned to the viewpoints of people from other cultures, social background or life situations that may be very different from our own.

Integrative empathy can be appropriated to create fundamental social change by helping to forge a culture of equality and human rights. This is because integrative empathy opens the door of our moral concern for neglected or marginalized social groups. The historical pattern is that empathizing with others (such as slaves, or indigenous people) makes us care about the plight of those outside our immediate community and treat them as human beings of equal value to ourselves. Using the integrative approach, we can then use policy instruments such as laws and human rights legislation to codify and universalize this moral concern. The virtue of the integrative approach in this case is that, empathy and rights will harmoniously work together to create social justice; empathy thus becomes a reason why we care about the rights of others. This position gains support in the statement accredited to the political thinker, Mathew Taylor, who posits that, "the emotional foundation of universalism is empathy".¹³

¹³ Taylor Mathew, *Twenty First Century Enlightenment*, (London: Royal Society of Arts, 2010), 16

The integrative empathy can be used to address the much advocated prison reforms in the Nigeria prison system. An empathy-based political campaign could be launched to get members of the public to understand the plight of prisoners in the Nigerian prisons. Handbills could be printed detailing the inhuman conditions of prisoners, oral testimonies of violence against prisoners and former prisoners could even be mobilized to give public talks about their ordeals in the prison yards. The results would no doubt occasion an upswelling of human empathy, remarkable to the extent of igniting an outrage of public displeasure, which may eventually attract the attention of the government and guide them in addressing the problem.

Integrative empathy can also be used by trade unionism as a tool for the creation of solidarity in relation to workers' right. Although, organizing strategies, ideologies, leadership and other factors all play a role in social change, empathy is essential for foregoing the social connections that make us care about the plight of others, and is an underlying force creating bonds of common interest and solidarity.

Empathy, using the integrative approach, can also be used to develop a high sense of nationalism. One of the most prominent and successful tools in modern history for shifting identity and values on a mass scale is education. Political elites in most countries used public education system to forge national identities that ensured citizens' allegiance to the nation state. For example, children were taught to sing the national anthem, speak the national language and learn the proud history of their country. Education still plays this role: in the Nigeria, millions of children recite the pledge of allegiance each day, in a ritual designed to foster patriotism.

From the above, it makes sense to consider how education system in Nigeria today can be used to liberate its citizens from the individualist focus of a consumer society based largely on extrinsic values, and forge a more community and relationship-based identities that reflect intrinsic values. An effective way to achieve this is to use empathy education, which can encourage children to step outside the narrow confines of self interest and develop a sense of common interest with both people and planet (and beyond the boundaries of the country). Doing so is probably our greatest hope of creating a new generation of political leadership. Empathy education is what we need to actually activate young people to care about fundamental issues of governance, formulation of state policies, global inequality and socio-economic problems. Empathy education is foundational for creating a common interest frame of thinking to build an influencing sense of patriotism and nationalism. There can therefore be no doubt that empathy education will serve as an effective method not only for creating common values at a deep level, but also for inspiring a new wave of active citizenship by future generations.

In addition to empathy education, another strategy to build a deep sense of nationalism is to grow empathy through community engagement. This is where the integrative model of empathy is mostly appreciated because it is pursued through consensus. When people get involved in certain kinds of community action, the result can be to boost their empathy level

(across gender ethnic, class and other divides), especially if their activities involves conversations with those involved shared experiences; and striving with them towards shared goals. In turn, this empathy helps to build new social networks between community members, it enables them to discover commonalities that make them bond with one another, and build levels of social trust. For example, that members of a local community join to form a new neighbourhood choir, which involves people from different religious and socio-economic backgrounds or prosecute a project that is explicitly designed to get people in communities to cross social divides and step into one another's shoes. By meeting each other on a regular basis, having face-to-face interaction, going through experience of rehearsing together and striving to prepare for a concert, the result is to expand empathic understanding and connection between those involved. The problem of interpersonal understanding is gradually addressed as the difference between them begins to dissolve. They make new friends, realize things they have in common, and ultimately come to trust one another and also establish a good sense of interpersonal relationship, there can be no doubt that the typical results will ultimately reduce prejudices, stereotypes and other divides between them and ultimately boost empathy and mutual understanding.

Integrative empathy through community engagement is also capable of producing the four outcomes depicted by Roman Krznaric: it increases community feeling and identity – people build new relationships and trust by engaging with others, embedding their identity more deeply in their community, which expands intrinsic values; it boosts wellbeing and environmental concern- expanding intrinsic values improves personal wellbeing, and promotes the common values that make people open to developing concern about environmental issues; it also deepens democratic culture – by strengthening civil society and promoting the public over the private self and; it immunizes against consumerism – through shifting the balance between intrinsic and extrinsic values, so people draw more of their identity from belonging rather than buying.¹⁴

Integrative empathy can also be used to campaign against poverty at the global level. This can be done at the business level and at the government level. With respect to business, in the last few years, there has been rise of a popular new concept; “empathy marketing”, which involves the training of employees – especially sales people – to get better at understanding the perspectives of their clients and customers. There is little that is progressive about empathy marketing, and its popularity reveals the way that the various skills of emotional intelligence are open to potential abuse. Instead, the focus should be on making the case that empathy is a tool for improving internal functioning in firms (or any organization), especially cooperation, teamwork and leadership. This implies that, there should be empathy training for corporate board members. As a strategy, training employees in empathy skills has become, or is already common in many companies: affective empathy has been shown to improve teamwork through raising emotional attunement, and cognitive empathy is recognized as a source of innovation.

¹⁴ Roman Krznaric, *Empathy: A Handbook for Revolution*, (London: Penguin Random House, 2014), 24.

This accomplishment nevertheless, there is need for further improvement. Appropriating the integrative approach will help people see new perspective on addressing and providing solutions to problems.

In addition empathy test in recruitment processes should also be encouraged. Contemporary realities revealed that companies need to integrate empathy tests into job recruitment psychological assessment. Companies need employees who don't just have technical skills, but who are emotionally intelligent, displaying relationship skills such as empathy. Integrative empathy would help develop both physical and mental skills required to improve interpersonal relationship. This should be seen to be of growing importance especially amongst global firms in which employees have to work with people of diverse cultures.

Similar to the idea of empathy training for corporate board members, empathy courses should also be given to key government officials. It may be said that there is nothing particularly unusual in this, in the sense that government employees in many areas already do empathy training, including health professionals such as doctors, nurses, social workers and judges. Integrative empathy will in this case broaden their knowledge and skills of empathy. It is important that such programmes are designed to maximize empathic learning.

In the final analysis, we should not be afraid of trying to empathise with those in power, indeed, it is essential to do so. It is tempting to reserve our empathy for the poor and the marginalized, the neglected and the powerless. But if we do not attempt to cognitively step into the shoes of political and economic elites, we may lose opportunities for understanding their minds and consequently fail to correctly interpret their behaviours and motivations.

Conclusion

This paper has examined and provided justification for the introduction of the *integrative approach* as a model of empathy by which an understanding of the other is pursued through consensus and face-to-face encounter. The Husserlian conception of empathy is found to be too narrow to adequately address the complexities of issues involved in interpersonal understanding. Husserl's treatment of empathy nevertheless provided a strong epistemological basis for a phenomenological investigation into the problem of interpersonal understanding. Hence the introduction of the *integrative approach* that lean upon the Husserlian conception of empathy, and using the consensus theory to draw on the consideration and distinctive features that are common to all other approaches. The paper also discussed the importance of the *integrative approach* to our contemporary society. It discussed how empathy, using the *integrative approach* can be used to understand the other with a view to fostering harmonious relationship between the individual and the society, between the employer and the employee, between government and its citizens, and between religions cultures and other forms of divide. The importance of empathy cannot be overemphasized. Empathy is what makes humans capable of effectively interacting with one another. It helps us work together to build a better society for everyone. It is an emotion that fosters the incentive to prompt us to protect and help

our neighbours. Empathy could possibly be the driving force behind the creation and maintenance of civilizations. A good understanding of the other will inevitably produce a sound interpersonal relationship that will guarantee an enduring peace and world order.

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