

# Understanding You

A Phenomenological Study about Experiences of Empathy among Social Workers Working with Forced Migrants

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# Abstract

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Empathy is a widely discussed subject in social work research, considered to be an important professional ability in interaction with clients. In contrast to its pervasiveness in practice, confusion surrounds the notion as different definitions of the phenomenon stands in conflict with each other. The 'simulation theory' was found to be a salient conceptualization of empathy in social work where empathy, as the act of understanding other subjects, is explained by terms of an automatic mental imitation of the perceived behavior of the other. As a deliberate act, empathy is hereby best facilitated through perspective taking. The phenomenological 'interaction theory' provides an alternative and opposing approach towards empathy, instead defining it as a direct intentional presence to the meaning expression of the other. Neither implicit nor explicit perspective taking is therefore necessary for empathic understanding to be reached. The purpose of this study was to explicate the phenomenon of empathy with a qualitative approach. The study was conducted by studying experiences of empathy among five social workers who in different ways met forced migrants in their work. By using a Husserlian phenomenological system of ideas as a methodological framework and research procedure the essential structure of empathy was pursued. The findings of the study suggest that empathy is first and foremost a presence to, and a direct understanding of the other's experience, thereby supporting interaction theory. In the discussion the simulation theory is argued to be insufficient in providing an exhaustive approach to the professional use of empathy in social work.

**Keywords:** empathy; forced migrants; interaction theory; phenomenology; professionals; migration research; migration studies; social work

# Preface

Writing this thesis has been a tough experience for me on many levels. Besides it being my first time writing a text of this scope, it has also been the first time that I have written an extensive academic text in English; the first time I have used interviews as empirical data; and the first time that I have conducted phenomenological research. I do not regard these as mitigating circumstances. Rather, I feel joy for the challenges I have put myself through since I have not chosen the simplest path reaching this achievement. I have learned a lot during the process and hope to continue doing so.

No matter how proud I am of the result of this ordeal it would not have been possible without the help of others. One might question the need for personal dedications in a master's thesis. However, these would not have been included if I had not felt truly grateful for all the input I have received. So, thank you, Magnus Englander, for your tireless support and interest when supervising my work. You have involved yourself to an extent beyond what I ever could have wished for. A person who has been putting up with even more, and who I am thankful for in so many ways other than just aiding me in writing these pages, is my wonderful, understanding and inspiring wife Lisa. I will not even try to describe the meaning you hold for me in my life. What can I say? – You are the Bee's Knees.

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# 1. Introduction

Empathy is considered important both in social work with clients of ethnic minorities (e.g. Augustín 2011; Gair 2013; Segal, Wagaman & Gerdes 2012) as well as throughout social work altogether (e.g. Levy, Ben-Shlomo & Itzhaky 2014; Turnage et al 2012; Ylvissaker 2011). Temporarily disregarding the many definitions of empathy, it is at a minimum coherent with the act of understanding others (e.g. Gair 2013; Gerdes, Segal, Jackson & Mullins 2011; Westaby 2010; Zahavi 2010). If the social worker is to be able to offer proper support and match suitable interventions with clients it must be preceded by an understanding of the client's situation and needs (Turnage et al 2012, p. 91).

When working with forced migrants\* there is a tangible social distance (c.f. Bogardus 1926) present between client and professional, constituting the necessity for, as well as challenging, the professional's empathic ability. Integrational issues; the lack of host country language skills; cultural disparities and severe traumatic experiences are just some of the issues afflicting this unique group of clients (c.f. Westwood & Lawrence 1990, pp. 149-150). These challenges may in turn lead to social problems like poverty, drug abuse, mental and physical disabilities also facing the ethnic majority (Sjögren 2005, pp. 55, 66, 68, 84); making certain groups of migrants particularly marginalized (id., p. 11). The polarization between the social worker and the client may be extreme, both in terms of the client's life situation *and* demographic factors such as age, gender and socioeconomic background. Considering this rather exceptional context, professionals working with forced migrants become an interesting point of departure for a research study.

Empathy is fundamental for social work practice but when turning to social work research several definitions of the notion are proposed. Gerdes et al (2011, pp. 110-111), as well as Gair (2013, p. 136), have noted the prominence of empathy as a salient theme within social work research but conclude that a unified conceptualization of empathy is absent. When not problematized, the meaning of empathy is simply taken for granted. Gerdes et al (2011, p. 110) find that a majority of social work textbooks do not even mention empathy or how to cultivate the empathic ability. Out of the research reviewed for this study empathy was not defined in several cases (e.g. Herzog et al 2009; Heyman 2002; Westaby 2010; Ylvissaker 2010).

How should we then approach empathy in social work? Segal et al (2012) proposes a theory of social empathy that utilizes both micro and macro empathic perspectives: “Social empathy is the ability to genuinely understand people from different socioeconomic classes and racial/ethnic backgrounds within the context of institutionalized inequalities and disparities [...]” (id., p. 541 ref. Segal 2010). Gerdes et al (2011, p. 112) and Segal et al (2012, p. 545) draw their empathy concept from neurocognitive science and the research on mirror neurons, defining empathy as both an explicit and implicit simulation process where understanding is reached through innate imitation of the other’s behavioral expressions. Deliberate displays of empathy is best facilitated through perspective taking (Gerdes et al 2011, p. 117; Segal et al 2012, p. 545); to ‘put oneself in someone else’s shoes’ (Gerdes et al 2011, p. 124). Also, Gair (2009, p. 58) findss that the portrayal of empathy “[...] as walking a mile in another person’s shoes [...]” is a common way for social work students to describe how empathy is carried out. Gerdes et al (id., p. 126) propose that their concept should be guiding for social work education as well as social work practice and that their approach may result in rectification of the notion, clearing any misconceptions of the phenomenon.

Zahavi (2010, p. 291), however, proposes a different conceptualization of empathy:

[...] empathy is a basic, irreducible, form of intentionality that is directed towards the experiences of others. [...] In empathy, the experience you empathically understand remains that of the other. The focus is on the other, and not on yourself, not on how it would be like for you to be in the shoes of the other.

Zahavi (2010) challenges the simulation theory from a qualitative point of view by drawing on phenomenological ideas of interpersonal understanding as a concept for empathy. This is done by combining ideas from phenomenologists Edmund Husserl, Max Scheler and Edith Stein. Zahavi’s approach is part of the so-called ‘interaction theory’ of empathy which is absent in the reviewed social work and migration studies research.

If the proposal of Gerdes et al (2011) and Segal et al (2012) should be guiding for social work it should also be supported by qualitative findings.

## 1.1 Purpose and research questions

The purpose of this study is to explicate the phenomenon of empathy by using a qualitative approach grounded in a Husserlian phenomenological system of ideas. The empirical data is gathered through semi-structured interviews of experiences of empathy among social workers\*\*. The social workers are employed within the field of migration policy, assisting forced migrants, in their work. The aim of the study is to investigate how the social workers' experiences of empathy compare to their knowledge of and conventional approach to empathy.

1. In what ways does empathy make its appearance in terms of the participant's experience when encountering and working with their clients?
2. What does the concept of empathy mean for the participants in their work?
3. Are there any given ambiguities in the participants' understanding of the meaning of empathy that manifest themselves in situations where interpersonal understanding is present?

## 1.2 Clarifications

\* The unifying term 'forced migrant' is used when describing the client group in this study. "Refugees and asylum seekers are forced migrants who flee their homes to escape persecution or conflict, rather than voluntary migrants who move for economic or other benefits." (Castles & Miller 2009, p. 188). The term underlines that just certain groups of migrants – refugees, asylum seekers and undocumented immigrants as opposed to for example guest workers – are more often subjects of social work intervention, such as economic aid and housing assistance. Additional classifying notions are to be considered referential.

\*\* The term 'social worker' in the context of migration policy is problematic. Political scientists, lawyers (e.g. James & Killick 2012; Westaby 2010), custom officials and police officers (e.g. Heyman 2002) are all prominent professions within this sector. However, even though the participants in the study have different educational backgrounds and different positions within different organizations they have, as seen below, work tasks which are usually associated with social work practice.



## 2. Research review

The reviewed empathy research is mainly delimited to migration studies and social work in order to connect the results more intimately with the social work discipline, present within each of the fields. The fact that empathy is a highly researched phenomenon makes an exhaustive presentation unmanageable without the loss of focus on the context relevant to this thesis.

A historical orientation is needed before debating and comparing specific inquiries into empathy within the field of migration studies. This is followed by a wider outlook into social work research.

### 2.1 The history of empathy

Empathy as a concept has a rather brief history, stemming from the German word 'Einfühlung', meaning 'feeling into' the other (Stueber 2013, sec. 3-4). The philosopher Theodor Lipps was a pioneer in using the notion in his research (id., sec. 5). Lipps was critical to the so-called *argument from analogy* as proposed by John Stuart Mill, which was at the turn of the 20th century still the standard account of how we come to know others (id., sec. 7). Empathy is in this approach regarded as "[...] a phenomenon of 'inner imitation,' where my mind mirrors the mental activities or experiences of another person based on the observation of his bodily activities or facial expressions." (id., sec. 5). In other words, the behavior of the other is compared with our own repertoire of behaviors. Lipps points out that analogy does not explain our innate understanding of the other as minded like ourselves (id., sec. 9).

Concepts closer to social work are found by reviewing empathy as it has been addressed in psychology research. Humanistic psychologist Carl Rogers (1959, p. 210) defines empathy as: "[...] to perceive the internal frame of reference of another with accuracy, and with the emotional components and meanings which pertain thereto, as if one were the other person, but without ever losing the "as if" condition." It means to arrive at the perspective of the other while maintaining the awareness that it is *I* who stand for the perceiving action and hence not confuse the other's expressions with my own (c.f. id., p. 211). Rogers (1980/1995, p. 142) later

developed his stance on empathy by stating that empathy is about sensing the emotional changes, experiences and meaning fluctuations within the other without judging or be drawn in emotionally yourself. A therapist is expected to observe the world of the other, not participate in it (id., p. 143). The use of empathy as a therapeutic tool can wield positive results for the receiver. It counteracts alienation (id., p. 151) and makes the recipient feel “[...] valued, cared for, accepted as the person that he or she is.” (id., p. 152). Empathy goes from being general, as in Lipp’s philosophical account, to become specific and practical.

Psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut complements Rogers theory by emphasizing an “on and off”-quality to the phenomenon. Also for Kohut (1971, p. 303) empathy is important in a professional setting since it is a strict observation “[...] for the gathering of psychological data [...]”. However, empathic understanding does not on its own offer any explanations of patient’s mental states, needed in therapeutic work (id., p. 300). The psychologist must be able to go in and out of the empathic attitude, “relinquish” it at times and go “beyond empathy” to be able to explain what one has observed, in order to reach comprehension (id., p. 303). “[...] Theoretical work which lacks continuous contact with the material that can be observed only with the aid of empathy would soon become sterile and empty [...]” (ibid.). On the other hand, one must at all times maintain a perspective grounded in a scientific reality which otherwise would result in “cognitive infantilism” (id., p. 300). Empathy is hence balanced between these criteria in an objective/subjective-dualism.

The professional aspect of empathy can also be found in social work research from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, though articulated differently. Mary Richmond (1917, pp. 37-38) describes the use of ‘imaginative sympathy’, to see the world of the other in a similar way to how the other sees him- or herself, while at the same time maintaining one’s “[...] own professional world in mind [...]” (id., p. 38). Showing understanding for the behavior of the client helps the worker to assess the client’s needs, and choose a course of action for stimulation of the client’s development and growth (id., pp. 38, 40). The multidisciplinary scientist George Herbert Mead (1934/1962, p. 298) also uses the term ‘sympathy’ in writing. He regards it as “[...] to take the rôle of the other person with whom one is socially implicated.” (id., p. 366). Also here it is a question of perspective taking. Researchers today agree that Mead’s concept of sympathy rather corresponds with empathy (e.g. Håkansson 2003, p. 2; Martinovsky 2006, p. 1/6). The same would be the case for Richmond.

But why is there a confusion surrounding what term to use? When facing early social work literature prior to the 1950's the term empathy was seldom used, even if the aim of listening to and understanding the client without becoming privately acquainted were part of the professional role (Freedberg 2007, p. 252). This is not strange considering the late introduction of the term empathy in English by psychologist Edward Titchener in 1909. This can be compared to the much older heritage of sympathy, used as early as the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and often defined as “[...] the ability to ‘feel with’ both the joyful and painful feelings of another.” (Gerdes 2011, p. 232). Gerdes (id., p. 233) supports a contemporary neurocognitive approach and regard empathy to be a multidimensional construct (see Decety & Moriguchi 2007, p. 4 of 21). She argues that sympathy and empathy both have an affective sharing component, an emotional response corresponding to the other's emotional expression. Sympathy however lacks the self-other awareness component that empathy has, for example Roger's “as if”-condition (c.f. Rogers 1959, p. 211). In empathy a heightened awareness to ownership is utilized. When taking the other's perspective one does not confuse the other's emotions with one's own, but relate to them as the emotions of the *other*. (Gerdes 2011, p. 233). Awareness of the other's *otherness* is implicitly or explicitly found within all of the empathy theories above.

## 2.2 Empathy in work with forced migrants

When turning to contemporary empathy research within migration studies it is clear that empathy theory is not the focal point of the research, but rather a questioned element situated in an organizational context.

The view on forced migrants in societal discourses is often inconsistent. There are tendencies to regard certain migrants in terms of being unwanted and *a problem*, a group emphasized as *non-citizens* (Hall 2010, p. 882). Hall (2010) has studied staff members of a detention center and their emotional expressions towards the ‘detainees’, immigrants designated for expulsion. She explores the mixed attitudes the professionals have of their clients, against the background of the detention center seen as part of a culture-political context (id., p. 885). The detainees are treated like criminals, punished and imprisoned even if they have not been convicted for any crimes (id., p. 883). The conclusion of migration policy as ambiguous is also found in

Rousseau and Foxen (2010) who have studied the refugee determination process, like Hall (2010), with a perspective on the affective state of the professional. They conclude that the “Refugee determination is a controversial and contradictory process.” (Rousseau & Foxen 2010, p. 71). On the one hand refugees are to be harbored from persecution by support of the Geneva Convention, and “On the other, refugees are increasingly represented in public and institutional discourses as potentially dangerous people [...]” (ibid.). Forced migrants are surrounded by ideological uncertainty.

The professional’s view of forced migrants plays together with overarching public narratives. Emotions are by Hall (2010, p. 886) regarded to be present in person-to-person engagement and against the background of an influencing milieu. It “[...] involves interpersonal interaction and negotiation, as well as the mobilisation of cultural representational complexes and norms.” (ibid.). Fear and contempt are the emotions that Hall (2010, p. 888) weighs as most prominent among the staff studied at the detention center.

Officers are acutely aware that people may not be as they seem; documents can be false, people are capable of terrible things, and they sometimes lie. The possible incongruence between stated identity and ‘real’ identity is always at issue. (id., p. 889).

The forced migrants become bearers of “[...] certain traits (trouble, compliant, disruptive). The detainee as person falls away.” (Hall 2010 id, p. 891). Similarities can be found in Rousseau and Foxen (2010, p. 72) who define empathy by drawing from Hoffman (2000 id., p. 29-30) who defines empathy as a congruent affective response to another’s communicated affective state. Hoffman (id., p. 30) emphasizes that empathy (‘empathic distress’) can be linked to morality and the “prosocial motive” that correlate, precede and contribute to “helping behavior”. Moral principles are guiding empathy and these moral principles “[...] are loaded with affect and [...] will influence the observer’s level of empathy, which will in turn be less dependent on the intensity and salience of refugee’s expressions of distress” (id., p. 72). On the basis of this moral approach Rousseau and Foxen (2010 id, p. 72) state that “The gap widens when the Other is socially constructed through split representations of good and bad, legitimate or illegitimate, as is the case for the refugee.” For Rousseau and Foxen, as

well as for Hall, normative views in society on forced migrants, forms the practice of treatment.

There is however a wider spectra of emotions present among the professionals which provides nuances to the attitude towards detainees as just potentially dangerous strangers. Hall (2010) also distinguishes expressions of care and concern towards the detainees:

A man who had been at Locksdon for nearly a year suddenly heard he was to be deported and officers bid farewell with compassion, telling one another it was not fair. An officer comforted a tearful detainee who was worried about his girlfriend and their baby, left alone after he had been picked on by the authorities in an early morning raid, and gave him a phone call, against policy. (Hall 2010, p. 891).

Occasionally the detainees are regarded as non-different to the staff (Hall 2010, p. 894). Affinity emerges and this state of mutuality is Hall's point of departure when defining empathy as an "[...] imaginative reconstruction of another person's experience." (ibid. ref. Nussbaum 2001). Nussbaum (id., p. 319), however, approach the *commonness* with the other as something having to do with *sympathy* and not empathy, but nonetheless stresses that "The recognition of one's own related vulnerability is, then, an important and frequently an indispensable epistemological requirement for compassion in human beings [...]". Not venturing into further discussion regarding the possible inaccuracy in Hall's reference, the heart of the matter is that Hall regards empathy as emotionally saturated and closely connected to the expression of compassion: "[...] compassion involves a notion of common humanity, and thus has a radical potential to disrupt." (Hall 2010, p. 894). Moreover:

Empathy has the potential to profoundly disturb the logic of the IRC [detention center] and challenge the clear differentiations between 'citizen' and 'other' that the sovereign decision on exclusion seeks to draw. The distinction between citizen and other, in which so much is invested, is exposed, ultimately, as arbitrary [...] The camp is exposed as a place of emotion, politics and resistance, where fear and contempt are rife, but where empathy is never wholly effaced.

Empathy as a human necessity does not easily fit within the organizational structure of the detention center and the principles that upholds it.

How does this affect the people working in this environment? Rousseau and Foxen (2010, p. 73-74) mean that to expose professionals to traumatized clients' experiences of suffering may create distress for the workers through the process of 'transmission of trauma'. Empathy can be part of this process and is seen as a potential obstacle or threat to the longevity of the work. Westaby (2010) finds in her study of immigration solicitors that they are subjected to 'emotional labor'. Hochschild (2003, p. 7) constructed the theory and explains that "[emotional] labor requires one to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others [...]". The emotions of the professional is a kind of commodity. The professional is selling his or her compassion to the clients: "[...] the worker can become estranged or alienated from an aspect of self – either the body or the margins of the soul – that is used to do the work." (ibid.). Hochschild (id., p. 187) means that emotional labor may lead either to: emotional over-involvement and 'burnout'; self-protection through emotional detachment; or a 'cynicism' for the acting of emotions altogether, resulting in inauthenticity.

Empathy clashes with organizational demands and expectations put upon social workers. Rousseau and Foxen (2012) mean that the professionals do not have the room needed to build a strong sense of advocacy with their clients. The professionals are representing authority to the clients, while having small margins to be autonomous, hence, becoming trapped in a bureaucratic system. (id., p. 89, c.f. Lipsky 1980/2010). "From the IRB member's side, concepts of empathy and compassion are used to confirm the benevolent image that they, as representatives of a humane system, want to project." (Rousseau & Foxen 2010, p. 88). Empathy becomes a problem because of conflicting moral principles and the workers incapability to take action in order to secure the other's well-being. James and Killick (2012) share their field of inquiry with Westaby (2010), studying the working situation of case workers representing immigrants in the asylum process. They describe migration policy in line with Rousseau and Foxen (2010), as a field where you as a professional are supposed to accomplish a lot with very little means. James and Killick (2012, id, p. 435) define empathy as "[...] an internalized understanding of or identification with the state of suffering by others [...]" referring to Moyn (2006) as cited in lectures by Kelly (2011). Moyn (2006) seems like a strange choice

of reference mainly since he is all together critical to the notion of empathy, studying the term as it has appeared in history research. James and Killick have a very broad approach to the concept. The main point made by James and Killick (2012, p. 437) is that the capacity for expressing empathy diminishes due to the case load of the workers, brought on by funding cuts and strive for efficiency. “Some client/worker interactions demonstrated that, while empathy, compassion, and opposition to the inhumanities of the system were of considerable importance, they could sometimes intrude on efficient decision making” (id., p. 449). Expertise and empathy were both part of the work but were also depicted as partly incompatible, sometimes conflicting with each other (id., p. 435). The professionals cannot act upon their concerns for the other due to the unpermitting structures in which they carry out their work.

The solution to this bidirectional pressure lies in the professionals approach to empathy and the role of emotions. Westaby (2010, p. 170) concludes that the solicitors could find balance in their professional role by aiming for expressing genuine empathy for the other in combination with pointing the clients to the restricting aspects of their working roles – such as laws, rules and conduct. This would relieve the tension built up by expectations from the clients that are impossible to live up to (ibid.). Even if empathy and sympathy are neither defined nor separated from each other in Westaby’s study, she finds support that “[...] mutual trust and confidence with the client is developed by engaging in deep acting or genuine emotional responses to produce authentic emotional displays of empathy and sympathy.”. Rousseau and Foxen (2010, p. 88-89) likewise conclude that the refugee determination process is fundamentally arbitrary when the professionals neglect the role of emotions in their work: “The crusade to uncover fraudulent claims for refugee status is founded on a supposed objectivity in which emotions are negated or denied while, in fact, they remain implicitly at the forefront of the IRB hearing.” (id., p. 89). Even though emotional over-involvement with the clients should be avoided, Rousseau and Foxen (2010) as well as Hall (2010) and Westaby (2010) argue that openness and reflection about the influence of emotions in the work is needed (c.f. Grant 2014, p. 341). On the contrary to their own outset James and Killick (2012, p. 454) argue that empathy actually may be an important component in the work:

[The] case workers may increase efficiency by sorting and screening potential applicants for eligibility under the law [...] empathy and

commitment actually makes the efficiency possible, thereby justifying the role of case workers and placing an instrumental value on their empathy and relationship-building role.

The gap between expertise and empathy expressed by the case worker can be bridged by not perceiving empathy as time wasting, but as a fundamental component in the work.

### *2.2.1 Additional conclusions*

The reviewed research raises questions about empathy as positive contra negative for professionals working with forced migrants; or rather, if it is impossible to implement empathy in the work harmoniously. In neither case is empathy as a notion thoroughly explicated. This may be because empathy simply is not the primary focus in the above research but a secondary concept used to carry forth other results; problematizing the surrounding conditions for the use of empathy in the work rather than problematizing empathy itself. The differing or absent definitions of empathy in the qualitative studies above speak for the need of further investigation into the phenomenon.

## 2.3 Conceptualizations of empathy within social work

In order to find more extensive conceptualizations of empathy we have to leave migration studies and review studies on empathy within the broader area of social work research. This will lead us to review quantitative approaches to empathy due to there being no qualitative studies on empathy in social work aiming for expounding the phenomenon in an equally thorough sense as the studies presented below.

### *2.3.1 Empathy as understood by social work students*

How does social workers define empathy? Gair (2009) gives us valuable insight into how social work students look upon empathy. Gair's (2009, p. 58) findings suggest that 'walking in someone else's shoes', as in taking someone else's perspective, is a



common description of how empathy is carried out. This correlates with the research reviewed for her study (e.g. Eckermann et al 2006, p. 113; Trevithick 2005, p. 81). The words ‘understanding’ and ‘relating’ are also common in the student’s answers, while ‘feeling’, not as much (Gair 2009 p. 59). This is a surprising find since much of the reviewed research in Gair’s (id, p. 53) study focuses on empathy as ‘feeling with’ or ‘feeling for’ another (e.g. Trevithick 2005. p. 156). The majority of the students could not empathize either at all or in depth with all of the characters in the vignettes, given that they did not share similar experiences with them (Gair 2009, p. 60, 62). In a later study, while focusing on social work student’s capability to empathize with a person belonging to a cultural minority, Gair (2013) finds support for the importance of relating or identification with the other as a condition for empathy: “[...] a commonly repeated response in this inquiry was that the students could not feel empathy because they had not experienced the situation.” (id., p. 144). The students’ approaches to empathy seem to both disprove and support different theories of the phenomenon.

### *2.3.2 Empathy as simulation*

Support can be found for Gair’s (2009) participants’ view on empathy as perspective taking by turning to social work research that elevates neurocognitive findings when explaining the empathic ability. Karen Gerdes and Elizabeth Segal do in several articles (Segal et al 2012; Segal 2011; Gerdes et al 2011; Gerdes & Segal 2011; Segal et al 2013) aim to reach a comprehensible conceptualization of empathy with the help of neurocognitive research. Segal et al (2012, p. 542) define empathy by referring to primatologist Frans de Waal (2008) who argues that there is an intimate connection between empathy and altruism. Caring for others, and the underlying ability – empathy – that enables this caring is *hard-wired* in both humans and animals. “Instead of assuming learned expectations or calculations about future benefits, this approach emphasizes a spontaneous altruistic impulse and a mediating role of the emotions.” (de Waal 2008, p. 292). Thus, empathy is driven by an urge to help others, something that both Hoffman (2000) and de Waal (2008) share in their definitions. Gerdes et al (2011, pp. 114; 125-126) point out that the discovery of, and continuing research on, the brains ‘mirror neurons’ should be the guiding empathy concept within social work. Iacoboni et al (2005, p. 533) explains that:

Mirror neurons are thought to recognize the actions of others, by matching the observed action onto its motor counterpart coded by the same neurons. The present findings strongly suggest that coding the intention associated with the actions of others is based on the activation of a neuronal chain formed by mirror neurons coding the observed motor act and by “logically related” mirror neurons coding the motor acts that are most likely to follow the observed one, in a given context. (id., p. 533)

In other words, when observing others the same parts of the brain are activated as if one would undertake that very same action. It resonates within us. As well as for movements of the hand, Kaplan and Iacoboni (2006) argues in another study, that this mirroring of the other is omnipresent in situations of understanding others. Also in situations which we would regard as driven by empathy. Hence, we empathize with others through simulation (Kaplan & Iacoboni 2006, pp. 181-182).

This foundational approach to empathy as an automatic neurological response conforms to active perspective taking. Empathy amounts to several levels: as a foundational unconscious mental state *and* as a conscious volitional skill (Segal et al 2012, p. 545) that can be trained and facilitated (Gerdes et al 2011; pp. 123-125). Gerdes and Segal do in several instances (Gerdes 2011; Segal 2011; Segal et al 2012; Gerdes et al 2011) draw their empathy concept on a model by Decety and Moriguchi (2007). Decety and Moriguchi (2007, p. 4/21) describes empathy as a multidimensional construct. Four stages are necessary:

1. Affective sharing between the self and the other, based on the automatic perception-action coupling and resulting shared representations.
2. Self-awareness. Even when there is some temporary identification between the observer and its target, there is no confusion between self and other.
3. Mental flexibility to adopt the subjective perspective of the other.
4. Regulatory processes that modulate the subjective feelings associated with emotion. (ibid.)

Empathy can be understood both from bottom-up perspective – amounting to primitive “[...] emotion sharing and motor mimicry aspects [...]” (id., p. 4/21) in the information processing of the brain, taking place implicitly without us noticing it; and from a top-down perspective – which are the more sophisticated and explicit mental acts of which we are aware of, “[...] representing our own thoughts and feelings as well as those of others [...]” (ibid.). Gerdes et al (2011, p. 113) do suggest a ‘nature-nurture’ approach to empathy, where they combine the empirical findings of mirror neurons in neurocognitive science with more theory-driven accounts of empathy, citing Bowlby (1969/1982; 1973) and Kohut (1982). Suggested by Gerdes et al (ibid.) is that Bowlby’s (1969/1982) attachment theory supports the view that empathy is a learned skill through development by early attachment with one’s parents. Links have been drawn between empathy and attachment theory before (see Gillath et al 2005).

Close to attachment theory is the idea of theory of mind (c.f. Ontai & Thompson 2008). In short, theory of mind consists of the idea that we understand mental states in others by either implicit or/and explicit theorization, to cognitively imagine or guess what the other might be thinking or feeling (c.f. Premack & Woodruff 1978; Fonagy et al 2002). Empathy is here seen as the skill of matching an imagined mental state of the other to one’s own (Goldstein & Winner 2012, p. 20); [...] an other-oriented emotional response congruent with the perceived welfare of another [...] (Batson et al 2002, p. 1656). While the ‘theory of mind’-theory (further referred to as ‘theory-theory’) sounds fairly similar to the simulation theory they are in fact two separate approaches to empathy. Gerdes et al (2011) does not recognize or comment the ongoing debate between simulation-theorists and theory-theorists, which for example can be seen in Gallese & Goldman (1998). Gallese and Goldman (id., pp. 496-498) as proponents of simulation-theory do not find support for theory-theory in their study:

The point is that MN [/mirror neurons] activity is not mere theoretical inference. It creates in the observer a state that matches that of the target. This is how it resembles the simulation heuristic. Nothing about TT [/theory-theory] leads us to expect this kind of matching.

Without being able to dig deeper into the discussions between simulation theory and theory-theory, the aim here has been to elicit that it is problematic to simply join these positions together. Simulation theory and theory-theory are in conflict given

that simulation theory presupposes an automatic neurological response as opposed to an abstract theoretical process proposed by theory-theorists. However, there are similarities between the concepts. Both simulation theory and theory-theory agree that the minds of others are hidden from us and that we have to imagine, theorize or simulate the mental states of the other in order to reach understanding (Zahavi 2010, p. 286). The conclusion to be drawn from Gerdes et al (2011) and their attempt of joining attachment theory with simulation theory is that one's empathic ability should not be regarded as something unchangeable. Empathy can be developed.

Since basic empathy is understood as a simulation of the other, explicit expressions of empathy should aim to do the same, carried out through perspective taking while maintaining self-awareness (id., pp. 112, 117, 118). If automatic expressions of empathy can be made intentional they can be cultivated. Gerdes et al (2011) do not just aim to explain the empathic ability, but also suggest how the empathic ability can be trained. They propose a series of exercises and activities to how their empathy concept can be used to cultivate empathy among social work students (id., pp. 118-124; see also Newell & Nelson-Gardell 2014). With the use of for example role-playing, the student can take on the role of another to reach increased understanding of other's social conditions and living situations (id., p. 120). One exercise, for example, consists of listening to a scenario about a person with a social problem and try to take her perspective, "[...] put themselves in [the other person's] shoes" (id., p. 124). The benefits of training the empathic ability are that the students: "[...] can approach individual and social well-being and social justice with more sophisticated understanding. In the process, they may create more and more effective interventions, particularly with clients from different backgrounds." (Gerdes et al 2011, p. 127). Moreover, Gerdes et al (2011, p. 125) suggest:

[...] that it would be helpful to teach students the basic process of neural pathway development that determines their affective responses, along with new findings about the plasticity and flexibility of the brain and theoretical foundation knowledge particularly regarding attachment theory.

Development of the empathic ability through learning of method, explanation and possible outcome is regarded as highly beneficial for social work students.

### 2.3.3 *Social Empathy*

The empathic ability is not just isolated to understanding between persons, but reaches further (c.f. Gerdes et al 2011, p. 127). Segal et al (2012) argue that empathy has far larger impact than just the isolated results of person-to-person empathizing. The authors introduce a model of ‘social empathy’ which “[...] is the ability to understand people by perceiving or experiencing their life situations and as a result gain insight into structural inequalities and disparities.” (Segal 2011, pp. 266-267). Social empathy is not just an understanding of *what* the other is feeling, but also *why* (Segal et al 2012, p. 545). It departs from individual understanding on a micro level and arrives at reaching a macro level of contextual understanding (id., pp. 542-543). The use of perspective-taking can hence facilitate understanding of people as members of groups with certain socioeconomical or ethnic backgrounds (id., p. 541, 546). With emphasis on race it involves: “[...] what life is like as a member of that racial group. In addition, historical events that have been brought to bear on that particular racial group must be understood. Finally, how other groups in society view membership in that particular racial group must be examined.” (id., p. 546). According to the fine-tuned model of social empathy reached by test of the Social Empathy Index (SEI)<sup>1</sup> the authors conclude in the discussion of the results that social empathy may lead to social justice (id., p. 552; see also Gerdes et al 2011); even if the authors state that further research has to be conducted (id., p. 554).

Elsewhere similar distinctions between empathy and cultural sensitive empathy are made: ‘cross-cultural empathy’ (Grant 2014; Gibbons 2011); and ‘ethno-cultural empathy’ (Gair 2013).

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<sup>1</sup> Developed by Segal et al (2012) to be used in combination with their Empathy Assessment Index (EAI) – measuring empathy, social responsibility and social justice through the use of questionnaires – in order to try their hypothesis (id., p. 548; c.f. Interpersonal Reactivity Index [IRI] in Davis 1983)

# 3. Methodology

The phenomenological interaction theory will be guiding for this study (c.f. Zahavi 2010). By using a phenomenological method theories may be supported or disapproved by the findings, however, a theory is not placed upon the data or used to reason forth results in the analysis. Instead the data is understood descriptively, on its own. (Gallagher & Zahavi 2012, p. 11). Phenomenology as a philosophy is of course theoretical, but not a theory within an already established epistemology. It is an epistemology in itself.

Contemporary phenomenology is concerned with instituting a way to conduct research of human experience, resting on a firm epistemological and ontological framework. It is a methodology in the philosophical meaning of the word, namely 'steps of thinking'. 'Method' in the context of a thesis is often regarded to be the 'steps of the study'. I have therefore chosen the term 'methodology' as a label for my scientific approach theoretical framework, and 'procedure' to describe the application of the phenomenology method.

Since the phenomenological concept of empathy is embedded in the method we must start with establishing an understanding of phenomenology as philosophy. These cannot be fully understood separate from each other. In a sense, the thesis hereby proceed into a different direction with the aim of familiarizing the reader with relevant pieces of the phenomenological epistemology, method and empathy concept, before the presentation of the findings of the study. The expansive attitudinal shift required to understand phenomenological thinking further speaks for the necessity of a thorough introduction, especially if one wants to convey the potentials of using the phenomenological approach within social work research.

## 3.1 Understanding Husserl and phenomenology

Phenomenology provides a less recognized approach to qualitative research than for example *hermeneutics*. There are similarities between the two traditions even if differences should not be neglected. Edmund Husserl, the founder of the phenomenological philosophy, is somewhat of an anonymous benefactor considering the impacts of his work contra its accreditation in the social sciences (Jarvie &

Zamora-Bonilla 2011, pp. 88-89). Many important theorists cited in social work research today express ideas that can be traced back to Husserl, either directly or indirectly – e.g. Habermas (id., p. 98) Schütz, Gürswitch (Duranti 2013, pp. 420-21) Gadamer and Heidegger. Husserl have at large inspired and been inspired by hermeneutic thinkers. Since phenomenology has the same purpose as hermeneutics – to understand and explicate phenomena qualitatively rather than explain and reduce phenomena quantitatively – the phenomenological tradition can be regarded as part of a hermeneutical project (c.f. Ricouer 1981; Davidson 2003, p. 95). Phenomenology has much in common with hermeneutics and *grounded theory* since they share the same theoretical framework (Davidson 2003, p. 3). Interpretation has a given place as an underlying element to Husserl’s phenomenology.

So, why is phenomenology fairly absent in social work research? The holistic approach of phenomenology makes it difficult to extract just segments of his work without being inconsistent (Jarvi & Zamora-Bonilla 2011, p. 89). Husserl published just a fraction of his manuscripts. He also developed and altered his ideas throughout his career (Zahavi 2002, pp. 2-3). One would gain a narrow and contradicting image of his philosophy by just reading his published works consisting of concepts that he later outgrew (Giorgi 2009, p. 4). The use of secondary sources when citing Husserl’s ideas is defended by this being a study in social work and not a philosophical inquiry into Husserlian scholarship. Today, Husserl’s followers aim to make his ideas more comprehensible and suitable for empirical studies (e.g. Giorgi 2009; Davidson 2003; Englander 2014). Further contemporary application of phenomenological thinking may give it a renowned presence in qualitative research.

## 3.2 Experience of the world

The basis for phenomenology is ‘experiences’, central in Husserl’s research. Throughout his career he defended the idea “[...] that knowledge is limited to what can be ascertained from how things appear to us in experience, given that our only access to objects, and to the world at large, is through experience itself.” (Davidson 2003, p. 4). It is the individual – the subject – who experience and the consciousness of the subject is what makes experiencing possible. Hence, Husserl argued that an understanding of the world and its phenomena must start with consciousness

(Bengtsson 2001, p. 37). Consciousness, experiences and meanings transcends our physical entity since understanding precedes explanation (Giorgi 2009, p.91). Consciousness, from a phenomenological point of view, must not by any means be confused with reality. As Merleau-Ponty (1962, p. vii) points out: “[...] the world is always ‘already there’ before reflection begins [...]”; by which Bengtsson (2001, p. 69) conclude that the world is not just the point of departure for philosophy, but the very thing that constitutes it (and everything else).

For us to be able to experience the world it has to be available for us, to appear in some way. Our bodies and their sensory capabilities to perceive what is around us are what make this possible. But “Perception is not a simple reception of information; rather, it involves interpretation, which frequently changes according to context” (Gallagher & Zahavi 2012, p. 8). Our subjective interpretations of the world does not mean that we are incapable of capturing reality. We can just access certain aspects of it, what is relevant for us here and now (Schütz 1967/2002, pp. 27-30). There are objects out there in the world that we can agree exist through our ability to experience them, but we cannot enjoy a third perspective of objects other than through abstract imagination, and not without them passing through our personal and subjective filter.

Since we do not have access to objects in the world ‘as they are’, phenomenologists use the term ‘given’ to underline the experienced aspect of what is presented to you (e.g. Gallagher & Zahavi 2012, p. 60). What is given does not just amount to ‘things’ but also other people, ideas, ideals, norms, emotions, fantasies, dreams, etcetera. Objects are given through presentation, as well as *appresentation* – what lies behind the horizon of objects (what cannot be directly perceivable) (Zahavi 2011, p. 230). The given “[...] retains its identity across these varied appearances [...]” (Davidson 2003, p. 19). A generalized ideality is constituted by series of experiences identified in regard to the object and this is what makes understanding possible (Husserl 1931/1992, p. 131); by filling in the gaps (Zahavi 2011, p. 231).

This ubiquitous relationship between the consciousness and the given is the intentionality. That consciousness is intentional means that we are always conscious *of* something (Zahavi 2010, p. 293). We are conscious of the painting on the other side of the room; conscious of the music flowing through the speakers; conscious of sadness after a hefty argument with a friend. We cannot *just* be conscious. There is always an intentional object.



The givenness of things is best understood by that we are first and foremost engaged in everyday living. Life takes place in a mundane and ordinary existence where we eat, sleep, work, attend to our partners and friends, our hobbies and other things we may find important. Husserl called this the “lifeworld” (Giorgi 2009, p. 11). This world comes before reflections of how the world is functioning, before explanations aiming beneath or beyond these activities as they present themselves to us (Schütz 1967/2002, p. 31). In the academic world the attempts to make the world comprehensible to us through questioning it, are carried out (Bengtsson 2001, p. 47). But this world is, just like the entertainment world; the world of sports; or the world of the media, dependent on the lifeworld (Giorgi 2009, pp. 10-11; Schütz 1967/2002, p. 15-16). The lifeworld constitutes the concrete experiential reality and is the requirement for all theories we might have of it since the lifeworld is pre-reflexive and pre-scientific (Bengtsson 2001, p. 46).

The existence of any object and what that object means is often taken for granted. “We are aware of what we experience without using introspection precisely because we have an implicit, non-objectifying, pre-reflective awareness of our own experience as we live it through” (Gallagher & Zahavi 2012, p. 17). The given holds obviousness to you. It is all part of your ‘natural attitude’, how you live your life naturally (Luft 1998, p. 155). Within the natural attitude we are naïve to the world.

If you for example would hold up an electric guitar and look at it you would not first perceive it is a physical thing constructed of matter – wood, metal, plastic, by sets molecules – but you perceive it as something with content: it is aimed to be played with (c.f. Bengtson 2001, 36); and you have a subjective relation to it: Do you play guitar? If yes, much or little? Would you be able to tell which model it is and even what year it was made? Or maybe you do not even know it is a guitar. Does it look like something else? Whatever the relation to any object it is impregnated with *meaning*, because however you perceive something your understanding is dependable on prior experiences. “[...] No single experience can stand on its own” (Davidson 2003, p. 23). For something to be a guitar you must have been acquainted with guitars before. Present understanding is motivational since any perception of *now* is influenced by what was before and what we expect to come (Gallagher & Zahavi 2012, p. 86). A guitar is something different if one decides to master it, seize in trying to or is in dire need of fire wood. The experience of the guitar is not the same over time but shifts dependent on the constantly altering context. There is a unity to this

flow that does not have to be explained based on factors to experiences themselves: “The experiences carry within them an intrinsic continuity, a continuity that unfolds through meaningful relationships of motivation rather than through physical relationships of causality.” (Davidson 2003, p. 96). Meanings are a driving force for human orientation.

### 3.3 Phenomenological empathy

Let us turn to how we experience and, consequently, understand other subjects. In phenomenology this is called ‘interpersonal understanding’. Some phenomenologists look upon this phenomenon as corresponding with the notion of empathy. Philosopher Dan Zahavi (2001; 2007; 2010; 2011; Gallagher & Zahavi 2012) has compiled ideas from several phenomenologists in order to construct an accumulated and a more unified phenomenological approach towards the phenomenon.

#### *3.3.1 Basic interpersonal understanding*

Let us recap on Zahavi’s (2010, p. 291) definition of empathy: “[...] empathy is a basic, irreducible, form of intentionality that is directed towards the experiences of others. It is a question of understanding other experiencing subjects.” We have at this point attained the knowledge needed in order to understand some aspects of the definition. Empathy is ‘irreducible’ on the basis of phenomenological thinking. We aim not to explain empathy independent on consciousness since this is an impossibility.

The ‘basic’ quality of empathy in Zahavi’s (2010, p. 291) definition however needs some clarification and it also helps us to differentiate empathy from emotional response and sympathy:

[...] Empathy] amounts to experiencing [...] the other person’s emotion without being in the corresponding emotional state yourself. We might of course encounter a furious neighbor and become furious ourselves, but our empathic understanding of our neighbor’s emotion might also elicit a quite different response, namely the feeling of fear. In either case, however, our emotional reaction is exactly that—a reaction. It is a

consequence of our understanding of the other's emotion, and not a pre-condition or pre-requisite for this understanding. (Zahavi 2010, p. 291).

Understanding precedes the reaction. For phenomenology, sympathy or 'emotional contagion' as Zahavi (2011a, p. 224; 2011b, p. 543) puts it comes *after* the empathic understanding. Furthermore you may not know *why* the person is angry but you will still understand *that* the person is angry with you and this is enough for a minimal form of empathy.

Zahavi's (2010, p. 291) definition of empathy as 'intentionally directed' towards another's experience, has already been somewhat covered. When empathy is carried out we usually take it for granted, just as our relationships to objects. We do not ask ourselves if other people are minded creatures, we take this for granted by thinking of their intentions, motivations and thoughts (Zahavi 2010, p. 298; Giorgi 2006, p. 552). Scheler (1954, p. 260) argues that we do not perceive mere physical motions of the other's body: but the excitement of the person that jumps up and down; or the frustration of the person who is shaking his or her head and arms. We are not just exposed to a physical entity but experience an "integral whole" between body and mind - an "individual bodily unity" (id., p. 261). The meaning cannot be separated from the action (id., p. 262). Furthermore, because of intentionality "The focus is on the other, and not on yourself [...]" (Zahavi 2010, p. 291). You are not gazing into yourself in order to understand the other but understand *the other's* expressions of happiness, sadness or anger as they are present to you.

Even if our relationship to subjects resembles our relationship to objects the other is normally not mistaken for an object. This is first supported by my relationship to my own body. The body is a part of me as a sensing self but at the same time I can perceive my body as something external and perceivable (Zahavi 2011, p. 239). For example, when we place our right hand on our left the hand we are both feeling and are being felt. We have a 'double sensation' of the body. (Zahavi 2001, p. 161). As we experience together with others we experience ourselves as well as the other person. When meeting another I understand that both of us have bodies, but that my body is my own, differing from the present body of the other which I experience. I understand that the other is present to me in the same sense as I am present to the other. The other thus becomes a subject and not an object. (Husserl 1931/1992, p. 126). We are aware of each other as we experience each other and everything around us together. This is intersubjectivity, or as Heidegger puts it: our 'being-in-the-world'

(Zahavi 2001, p. 154). This is the sameness we share by *being* and by being present *together* in the world to each other. Intersubjectivity becomes interpersonal since I understand that other subjects are persons, with all that that entails, just like me.

That I experience objects together with others does not mean that something becomes real first when two people experience it by verification.

The explanation offered by Husserl is that objects cannot be reduced to being merely my intentional correlates if they are experienced by others. When I discover that the object I am currently experiencing is also perceived by an other, my relationship to the object is changed. Only insofar as I experience that others experience the same objects as myself, do I really experience these objects as objective and real.” (Zahavi 2001, p. 159).

The objects are there and as I realize that they are there for others as well, I understand that they are real *for me* and *for others*. We are in the same place, influencing each other both directly and personally or indirectly through ideas, principals and norms as well as through manmade objects. These are things – animate as well as inanimate – that we use daily and by this we are in our actions always co-present with other users. Together we share the meaning and the purpose of the given which we all are interpreting together (cf. Mead 1934, Section 11). These meanings are not confined within our heads, which would suggest that I give and receive meanings to and from others by some form of telepathy. Meaning radiate from the world, out *there*, which I together with others relate to (Husserl 1931/1992, p. 102). We are together with others directed towards phenomena in the world and the meanings are attached to them. This does obviously not just take place in the present in a social context. The past is influencing and we are co-present with the historicity of humanity. “I see things the way others see them. I learn what is normal from others, and I thereby partake in a common tradition which stretches back through a chain of generations into a dim past.” (Gallagher & Zahavi 2012, pp. 94-95). Intersubjectivity is like the glue that binds understanding of the world together.

This may sound collectivistic. Am I just a vessel for parts of a massive experience cluster? What about individuality? Scheler (1954, p. 243) is clear that one is not just the sum of one’s experiences; the fact that I regard my experiences as mine, something in relation to myself, is important to underline. But for Scheler ideas and

thoughts are not private (Scheler 1954). The idea that we can just think our own thoughts and feel our own feelings is a redundant statement. It is of course *I* who stand for the thinking of *my* thoughts. They have a certain *mineness* to them. But if we try to trace their origin we quickly understand that they are hugely influenced by others. Scheler suggests that the reproduction of what we have learned from others either directly or indirectly is all there is. No idea is solely made by me. (id., p. 245).

What occurs [...] is an immediate flow of experiences, *undifferentiated as between mine and thine*, which actually contains both our own and others' experiences intermingled and without distinction from one another. (id., p. 246)

In this respect, therefore, there is, at bottom, no very crucial difference between self-awareness and the perception of mind in others. (id., p. 251)

Even if your experiences are experienced as uniquely yours this does not conflict with the idea that there are some things that are general to us. We do not share everything but enough to distinguish that there is a normality (c.f. Husserl 1931/1992, p. 130). It is constituted in me with a subjective appearance but I know its fundament is also within the other and between us; hence it transcends me and is not confined within my individuality (id., p. 134). And the fact that I can understand others disclose the presence of intersubjectivity.

For Scheler we seem to almost blend together with others but Stein provides us with an important distinction. Even if experiences are shared I do not mistake the other for me. First Stein argues that empathy cannot be an object to outer perception (Stein 1917/1989, p. 6-7). To reflect I subjectively need to objectify myself. A remembered self by remembering, an alternative self by fantasizing or a future self by wishing. They are the same, they are me, but they still do not coincide. (id., p. 8). Empathy is primordial, unquestionable immediate existing for me. Like an object I am present to the experience of the other since I can reflect upon it. But empathy is also non-primordial as it is not myself as a subject who is in relation to the others' experience. The other's experience is not my experience but the *other's*, an object *for me*. (id., p. 10-11). Therefore, I do not risk to confuse the other's experience with my own.

With this in mind we have a limited access to other's experiences. Although we can experience others, Husserl would agree that the givenness of the other's experience is incomplete since it lacks the insights of the subject that objectifies itself, to borrow Steins (1989, p. 11) words. Addressing the process of pairing Zahavi (2011, p. 235) explains this incompleteness and how it is overlapped: "When I encounter another, my prior self-experience will serve as a reservoir of meaning that is transferred onto the other in a purely passive manner. As a result of this, a phenomenal unity is established." This may evoke the idea that pairing is corresponding with the idea of simulating other's behaviors by turning to myself. However, it is a mutual comparison of shared experiences, an exchange of meanings, not a one-sided replication of something that is hidden (id., p. 236). Pairing is to be understood as harmonizing and bridging the expressions of the other with oneself. These present gaps in coming to understand others should not be regarded as "[...] an imperfection or a shortcoming; rather, it is constitutional." (Zahavi 2007, p. 192). When I attend to a shared experience of the other I will always lack the first-person perspective but after all, it is not *my* experience. It is an understanding of the "other *as* other" (id., p. 198; Rosan 2012, p. 127, emphasis added).

This elementary relationship between embodied minds is what enables interpersonal understanding – empathy – and what makes understanding bidirectional. This does not only mean, to state the obvious, that we can both empathize and be empathized with. It also means that other people can sense when we are trying to be empathic and relate to that.

### *3.3.2 Higher-order interpersonal understanding*

The basic empathic act that is described above is a process which we are not always aware of. Empathy understood as interpersonal understanding is something we do constantly as soon as we engage with others, as we are present to their meaning expressions. On the other hand Husserl would claim that the basics of empathy does not "[... amount] to the full range of interpersonal understanding." (Zahavi 2011a, p. 246). It is important to clarify that also explicit mental acts such as reflection, mirroring and projecting amounts to the phenomenological concept of empathy (Gallagher & Zahavi 2012, ch. 9). And after all, we cannot always understand the other directly or with just basic empathy. We need other ways to complement this

understanding, but not in a way that undermines the foundations of direct understanding (Luft & Schlimme 2013; p. 348). This by for example suggesting that occasional explicit simulation must suggest also an implicit form of simulation of which we are unaware. Empathy is *both* a direct understanding and occasional inference but the direct understanding will always precede any inference. Hence empathy can be achieved on different intellectual levels, but we are always first confronted with a unified whole. It is hard to argue from a phenomenological standpoint that we can divide interpersonal understanding into several processes, a psychological state and a behavioral one; only through abstraction, as for example in reflection, can we divide the unit *after* we have perceived and understood what to divide (Gallagher & Zahavi 2012, p. 203). Hence, the phenomenologists cannot focus on interpersonal understanding as something different from empathy.

Empathic ability can be developed by being sentient and by focusing on the empathic act deliberately. This is shown by Englander (2014, pp. 6, 16) whom is also drawing on Zahavi's (2010) integrated theory. One can be aware of the presence, as it is carried out, towards the other's meaning expressions. Emphasis can be put on the attendance directed towards the other through bodily presence and listening and in other ways preserve the posture of seeking understanding of the others experiences in an active sense. (Englander 2014, pp. 18-24). One focuses on the other's intentionality towards a common phenomenon, which both are present to and can understand, while actively putting one's own intentionality towards that phenomenon in parentheses (id., p. 11, 15). You are watchfully directed towards the other's understanding of a phenomenon, not your own. Englander's (id., p. 12) method thus helps us become alert to and discern when we leave the attendance of the other in order to engage in different actions, as for example providing a treatment or general intervention. More abstract forms of empathy, such as explicit simulation or theorizing of the other, can be used when needed but what is better than to ask the person to explain what they mean? (Zahavi 2010, p. 303).

The deliberate expression and governing of the empathic ability becomes significant in professions dealing with providing support to people, in one way or the other. (e.g. Luft & Schlimme 2013; Davidson 2003; Davidson & Salomon 2010).

## 4. Research procedure

Larry Davidson's (2003) and Amedeo Giorgi's (2009) qualitative phenomenological methods will both be guiding for this study. Davidson, as opposed to Giorgi, fulfills the forth phenomenological step which ties together the phenomenological method with the phenomenological empathy concept. Because of this Davidson is prioritized. I will borrow Davidson's outline and methodological steps and complement with Giorgi's theoretical insights into phenomenological empirical research. The methods are compatible with each other due to their shared epistemological ground. Possible inconsistencies will be presented as we go.

We start off by discussing different practical considerations surrounding the study. This is followed by a return to the research questions. After this we take a closer look at how the steps of phenomenological method will work as a research procedure. A review of the limitations along with the ethical considerations will end this section.

### 4.1 Phenomenology as a scientific method

For phenomenology, consciousness is at the forefront of the methodological dispositions. Husserl regards the phenomenological philosophy as a *rigorous* science meaning that no inquiry should be held obvious or left unquestioned (Applebaum 2012, p. 36-37). In phenomenology, this rigor rests on the acknowledgment of the unavoidable role that consciousness play in our lives. It is omnipresent, also for the scientist, and by accounting instead of ignoring its presence and influence when conducting research, we reach a position that offers a critical approach to knowledge and how one acquires it. (Giorgi 1997, p. 236). In order to maintain this rigor, what can be studied through the phenomenological method must therefore be an experienceable object for consciousness – a *phenomenon* (Giorgi 2009, p. 94). Often science has been convinced that by understanding the physical world we may understand consciousness as an object in the natural world. Few have thought that we might need to study consciousness to better understand what it means for something to be real. (Gallagher & Zahavi 2012, p. 28).

But how do we draw out the knowledge from the experience? Phenomenology comes from an introspective tradition as many other philosophies. However, having



the data and analysis coming from the same person is today regarded a liability since it involves uncheckable bias (Giorgi 2009, p. 94). Contemporary usage of phenomenology usually includes the use of empirical data (e.g. Giorgi 2009; Davidson 2003). The interviews are to be regarded as narratives (c.f. Giorgi 2009, p. 107; Davidson 2003, sec. 3).

Stories are not simply records of what happened, but continuing interpretations and reinterpretations of our lived lives. They are essentially constructive and reconstructive phenomena that involve deletions, abridgments, and reorderings (Zahavi 2007, pp. 182-183)

Narratives are temporary and therefore incomplete, but they are also the only way for us to try to make sense of the inner life of others. I encounter the other person, not extracted from the everyday life but in the middle of something, a beginning and an end. The person is going somewhere. (Gallagher & Zahavi 2012, p. 215). By being present to another subject's experience as it is lived through in the natural attitude the researcher is given access to a chosen phenomenon (Giorgi 2009, p. 96). The phenomenon is then explicated, in the precise meaning of the word: to elucidate, untangle and unveil meanings encapsulated and obscured in the data (c.f. Ricoeur 1981, p. 127).

## 4.2 Three phenomenological reductions

From interview to finished analysis the study has been carried out with the use of three consecutive phenomenological reductions.

It might be seen as confusing to first hold that phenomenology regard the world as infinite in depth, then secondly aiming to *reduce* it. Reductions are mainly reducing the researcher's attitude towards the world and not the world itself. They are temporary for the sake of carrying out the research. One can rather view them as stances or as a kind of focusing used in steps towards viewing the phenomenon differently than one would in the natural attitude. "[...] a heightening of the experiencer's presence to the activity of consciousness." (Giorgi 2009, p. 91). The steps are necessary for maintaining scientific rigor in the research.

An important notion to these steps is the *epoché* (e.g. Husserl 1931/1992, p. 102). It is a process of bracketing or suspending knowledge we have about the studied phenomenon in a scientific and worldly sense (c.f. Giorgi 2009, p. 91-93; Davidson 2003, p. 100). While the participant is let to stay in the natural attitude the researcher uses the epoché to riddance naïve and unquestioned assumptions towards the participants answers that otherwise may impose on the quality of the findings. But is this at all possible? Would this not entail an impossible ordeal of forgetting the purpose and aim of the study and how the participants experiences correlates with reviewed research? It is important to emphasize that we do not wish to *remove* or *delete* our knowledge of the phenomenon, we just do not want to *engage* it (Giorgi 2009, p. 91-92). “It is about [...] keeping a tension between the past and the present in order to discern their respective roles.” (Giorgi 2009, p. 93). We do not seek a total or perfect use of the epoché (ibid.). It should be regarded as a thorough practice of critical thinking, letting it pervade the scientific process and not just being a mere background principal (Giorgi 2002, p. 12). The aim of the epoché is to improve the researcher’s attentiveness and discipline towards the phenomenon.

#### 4.2.1 *The phenomenological reduction*

The first step of the phenomenological method is thus in regard to scientific preconception. Davidson (2003, p. 97) uses the label ‘bracket of objective science’ for this first step of the method. It is the suspension of all “[...] theoretical-scientific assumptions about the objective nature of our subject matter [...]” (ibid., ref. Husserl 1970, p. 135). If for example Freudian ideas would solely guide the understanding of the participant’s experience they would narrow the view of the phenomenon. A general psychological orientation, all together, would increase possible explanations of what is present in the experience at hand, but then again with just many more indiscriminating assumptions. Enriching aspects would be lost due to the focus on what is strengthening and weakening our assumed theoretical position; bypassing the meanings that the participant elicit in the experience and not letting them stand on their own (Davidson 2003, p. 100). It may be tempting to understand experiences through ‘external factors’ – cause of social class, power distance, cultural or biological aspects. They may be useful in other instances, but in phenomenological study we are looking for the *internal* factors. (Davidson 2003, p. 99).

The first primary meaning of the reduction is that the object presented to consciousness must be understood as something that is present to consciousness exactly as it is experienced and one does not claim that it exists exactly the way it is experienced. (Giorgi 2009, p. 90).

What the experience is consisting of is independent of scientific knowledge.

This step is omnipresent all throughout the study, from formulation of interview questions to the conducting of the interviews as well as in the analysis of the data. Any theory is put aside in order to open up the perspective to what is given. This was proven difficult when for example a participant gave a surprising answer which could be related to certain theoretical ideas. As a measure the attention had to be redirected to the participant's narrative, while, most importantly, refraining from asking follow-up questions resting on theoretical interest or curiosity.

#### 4.2.2 *The phenomenological-psychological reduction*

In the first step the natural attitude is bracketed. While in the second, the existence of anything outside the participant's experience. One is being aware of the content of the experience rather than the reality; aiming for depth into what is present, not what surrounds it *outside* the person. (Davidson 2003, p. 100). This position rests on the assumption that the act of perceiving precedes the act of positing. In other words we understand what is perceived before inferring what it *is* (Giorgi 2009, p. 91). For Giorgi (2009, p. 87-91) this step is part of the phenomenological reduction. This is understandable considering the resemblance between them. Nonetheless, Davidson (2003, p. 100-101) keep them separated and state that we further leave the natural attitude in favor of a 'personal attitude'. This does not mean that we aim to lose ourselves in a subjective realm. Rather the experiences are understood through their relationship with each other, their motivational context (Davidson 2003 p. 97, 105). A *microstory*, as for example "James" experienced unwillingness to go to school can be understood by another microstory where James tells us that he is often being bullied in class. In James *macrostory*, the overall picture of James' experiences, we can see that James has a sense of low self-worth. All of this gives us a better understanding of James and his experiences (c.f. Davidson 2003, p. 102). The meanings do not need to be stated explicitly by the subject but can also be there

implicitly underneath, as long as they can be disclosed (id., p. 7; Giorgi 2009, p. 125). James might never say that he has a sense of low self-worth but it can be understood implicitly by him telling us that everybody is better than him at everything, while he elsewhere says that he got the best grades in class this semester. All this may seem obvious but it is exactly what we seek. Obvious findings can challenge or contradict scientific results held as evident (id., p. 7-8).

In practice this step is mainly part of each interview procedure. Comparing the narrative of one participant with any of my own or with another participant's experiences is avoided. The step is also followed by riddance of suspicion towards the other's experience. We are present to the other's experience solely and genuinely without questioning it. The researcher's expected mindset and the phenomenological concept of empathy (c.f. Englander 2014) is one and the same.

During the interviews it was sometimes proven difficult to refrain from comparison when a participant answered in way very similar or dissimilar to what another participant had stated. The same measures described in the first step was undertaken to relieve this.

#### *4.2.3 The transcendental reduction*

The transcendental reduction might be the most philosophical step in the method. Davidson (2003, p. 109-116) emphasizes its strength in research. The stance of understanding meanings as shareable is what establishes intersubjectivity for phenomenology. Intersubjectivity constitutes the transcendental reduction. (Davidson 2003, pp. 109-110, 114). "Experience, as meaning making, is a transcendental function." (id., p. 112). Meanings are not private and confined within our heads, but out there in the world beyond ourselves (id., p. 113). We can through the preceding steps describe the assembled meanings in the experiences of our participants' narratives. The reason why the researcher at all can understand these meanings is because the meanings transcend the person (id., p. 115). There is something about a phenomena that makes it identifiable, both for ourselves as well as for other subjects. By rising to "[...] an eidetic level, that is, to the level of a series of ideas [...]" (Giorgi 2009, p. 88) we can explicate what is constituting this identity, the *essences* of the phenomena. These essences together form an invariant (or essential) structure (ibid.). If the structure is recurrent through several instances we

reach qualitative validity (id., p. 12, 74-75). This gives us generalized findings in regard to the phenomena. As Morley (2010, p. 227) suggests, when tending to Husserl's more mature unpublished works, we should not regard transcendence or the transcendental reduction as a step away *from* the life world into an ideal world soaring above, away from ourselves. The transcendental reduction urges us "[...] to see deeper dimensions of our adherence in the world [...]" (ibid.). In that sense one goes beyond the natural attitude and our everyday natural explanations that may otherwise limit our understanding.

In practice, this step is strictly used in analysis. Comparing while interviewing was avoided. Now it is the opposite. The meanings found in each individual case are coded into themes which are then linked together across the data (Davidson 2003). This is done through a process of eidetic reduction (Davidson 2003, p. 88); or 'imaginative variation' (Giorgi 2009, p. 69). By removing aspects of the phenomenon we can discern which ones that are bearing.

[...] let us take a red metal chair as our object. What is it about the chair as we experience it, asks Husserl, which makes it precisely a chair and not something else, like a table or a couch? Is it essential, for example, for the chair to be red for it to be a chair? Similarly, is it essential for the chair to be made of metal for it to be chair?" (Davidson 2003, p. 88)

Quickly we explicate similarities between each case. Relevant corresponding elements among the interviews become constituents to the essential structure of the phenomenon. What cannot be found in *each and every* interview is ignored as it does not hold essential quality.

But if a theme is present in the majority of cases, does this not make it an important find? "Husserl is not saying that every such experience is automatically correct. It is the other way around. He is saying that among all of the experiences that humans can have, some possess the quality of valid knowledge because of the self-evidence contained within them." (Giorgi 2002, p. 11 ref Husserl, 1919/1983, p. 44). Many themes a participant may focus on can hold bearing meanings for their specific narrative. This we need to respect but turning to them and argue in terms of occurrence or probability is unquestionably a quantitative criteria we want to avoid. Following the phenomenological method, we present what can be presented but refrain from disclosing what cannot be disclosed. (Davidson 2003; Giorgi 2009).

All the epistemological ground work done up till this point may, by some, be regarded as unnecessary or even misplaced in social work research. After all, this is not a philosophical study so why bother with philosophical inquiry? On the contrary, the biggest strength of the phenomenological method is the philosophical baseline. With the transcendental reduction we leave the use of narrow perspectives. We do not approach the phenomena of empathy from the view of neuroscience (e.g. Iacoboni et al 2005); history (e.g. Westby 2010) or social psychology (e.g. Rousseau & Foxen 2010) but take a step back and go beyond the restrictions of each tradition. Davidson (2003, p. 110) states that theories like social interactionism or social constructivism as philosophical foundations for research “[...] remain[s] transcendently naïve.” (id., p. 111). If one does not clarify the meaning of *meaning* or regard meanings as strictly personal and other minds as hidden from us, one has to explain meaning in terms of physical matter, and qualitative research would then put its trust in the natural sciences and positivism (Davidson 2003, p. 110). To regard meaning as transcendental may sound obscure at first but the converse approach is harder to defend within qualitative research. By doing this we can defend that experiences are important to understand since they are the gateway to understanding the world and we cannot get rid of them. We must face this issues if qualitative research is to be regarded as significant to science.

For an eclectic field like social work research a phenomenological method, especially with its transcendental intersubjective approach, is therefore highly motivated and can be used for studying anything that can be experienced and shared.

### 4.3 Practical considerations

The reason for choosing only social workers as participants in the study, instead of or in combination with clients (c.f. Westwood & Lawrence 1990), is defended by the ambition to obtain a certain depth. A study aiming to include both parties would not have provided an equally thorough explication of empathy, which the field is in need of.

Five subjects with experiences of the phenomenon were interviewed through open-ended interviews<sup>2</sup>. Giorgi (2009, p. 198) suggests a minimum of three interviews while Davidson (2003, p. 93) in passing recommends a range from 12 up to 36 interviews. We are however focusing on depth, rather than width (Englander 2012, p. 21). The findings should have a rich variation, sufficient for transferability and generalization, not representativeness to a certain population (id., p. 20). Hence, the length and quantity of the interviews must be guided by an aim for saturation concerning what is relevant and needed in order to explicate (id., pp. 24-25; Giorgi 2009, p. 124). Fullness in the data was reached by the set amount.

Since generality is desired in regard to the findings, the more variety to the attributes of the participants, the more convincing the conclusions in analysis become. Selecting participants who contrast each other in terms of demographic factors, educational background and work experience provides richer data. Hence, in the case of this study the results are not delimited to professionals with homogenic characteristics (e.g. only *elderly* social workers; *male* social workers; social workers from the *ethnic majority*; and so on). This qualitative research technique is called *maximum variation sampling* (Cohen & Crabtree 2006). Its application is exemplified below in the presentation of the five participants interviewed:

- P1 is a man in his mid-twenties with a Swedish heritage. He is a law-student and works as a volunteer in an NGO-organization assisting people who are undocumented and regarded as illegal immigrants. P1 defines himself as an asylum activist, hiding families by arranging housing and giving everyday support, as well as handling economic issues.
- P2 is male and in his late thirties. He was born in Mid-Europe with parents descending from the middle-east and migrated to Sweden at a young age. P2 has an education in social pedagogy from higher vocational education, as well as mixed education at academic level. P2 works with unaccompanied minors as a treatment assistant in a private organization.

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<sup>2</sup>The five interviews took place on different locations in the south of Sweden, between the 6th and 28th of October, 2014. The lengths of the interviews were ranging between 46 – 75 minutes. One participant were found through social media networking. Two others through my contact with supervisors or informers in organizations working with forced migrants. These participants were notified of the study by internal communication upon which they contacted me. The last two were found through personal connections. A colleague from work and a classmate at the university contacted two friends respectively who became interested and made contact.

- P3 is a woman in her late twenties. She was born in South America and came to Sweden when she was little. P3 has a social work bachelor's degree and works in public social services. Her work is oriented towards unaccompanied minors. Amongst other interventions she handles subsidy cases for the particular client group.
- P4 is female and in her mid-twenties, born in Sweden just as her parents. She has a bachelor's degree in human rights and has undertaken various courses in law and gender studies. P4 works as a treatment assistant in a public housing organization for unaccompanied minors.
- P5 is a woman in her mid-fifties and of Swedish heritage. She is an experienced case worker assigned to the reception stage of the asylum process. P5 belongs to a group of administrative officials that asylum seekers are likely to meet first. She has a bachelor's degree in social work.

Prior to the interviews, information was sent out including the purpose of the study, ethical considerations and instructions in which the participants were asked to prepare one or several associated experiences of empathizing with a client in their work.

The interviews were conducted and transcribed in Swedish because it would be easier for the participants to express themselves more freely in their native language. The richness of the material was deemed more important than transparency. All the following quotes in the findings were naturally then translated to English vignettes. Translation can however never be exact quotation, considering the idioms and everyday words that may be untranslatable between languages. In the translation process I borrowed from Giorgi (2009, pp. 130-131, 145), focusing on keeping the meanings of the vignettes intact. Repetitive words, hesitation, self-interruption, self-correction and unnecessary complementary were excluded when disturbing the flow of reading.

Regarding the transcription process both Davidson's (2003) and Giorgi's (2009) instructions are scarce. Through given examples (Davidson 2003, p. 132, 138; Giorgi 2009, p. 140-143) one can however find out that traditional transcript symbols (e.g. Heritage & Clayman 2010) are not practiced within phenomenological methods. The transcription process in this thesis was aimed to catch all audible words in the audio recorded interviews, as well as actions (such as body language like laughing) that were considered important in order to understand the meaning of certain passages. Pauses



were not written out, as far as no confusion were expected to occur from reading a passage without them. The same goes for loudness and pace of the conversation.

This is done simply because these language nuances cannot be accounted for. Contradictions and uncertainties are just described and not forcefully disclosed, it is enough presenting them *as they are*, instead of drawing conclusions from that which cannot be concluded without speculation (Giorgi 1992, pp. 126-127). If something needed to be further understood, the participant was contacted and asked for a clarification (c.f. Davidson 2003, p. 85). This was done in some cases for this study when certain passages could not be described correctly in the transcription process. Telephone interviews were scheduled and the participants received and played samples of recorded audio that needed clarification. It could for example be instances of inaudible dialogue or a topic of interest that was not followed up properly at the time of the interview.

#### *4.3.1 Research and interview questions*

By being given access to the experiences of the participants the researcher can study phenomena as they are *lived through*. The researcher *direct* the participant through their experiences but not by asking leading questions (Giorgi 2009, p. 123). To direct the participant to certain areas of experience where meanings regarding the phenomenon can be found is not problematic since it is not a question of what the content *is*, just that the contents are relevant (ibid.). A series of questions are asked in order to explore certain focus areas of the phenomenon while the outcome is held open-ended (c.f. Davidson 2003, pp. 68-69). One wants to ask questions that encourage the participant to tell us about their experiences, to share them with us, not explaining them for us (Davidson 2003, p. 63). In formulation of these, words like “Why...” where therefore omitted in favor of “How...” and “In what ways...” (Davidson 2003, p. 69).

Now turning to the interview questions used in the study (translated from Swedish):

- a. How do you go along when being empathic with your clients at work?
- b. How do you see the need for empathy in your work?
- c. Tell me about an experience from work where you felt that you understood one of your clients by being empathic.

Questions “a” and “b” are formulated with the help of Davidson’s (2003 pp. 68-69) proposals. These were used in order to open up the interview and get the participants acquainted with the phenomena. Davidson (2003, p. 69) wants us to ask questions close to the present (“How *are* ...” rather than “How *did*...”) and not letting the participant create a distance to their own experiences and start analyzing them (“Tell me *about*...”). Question “c” was fetched from Giorgi’s (2009, p. 124) framework. Giorgi (2009, p. 124) wants to keep focus on the experience and how it is lived through and not welcoming mere opinions or attitudes about the phenomenon.

The ideal framing of an interview question for Giorgi is not ideal for Davidson because of the distancing aspect. When seeking to explicate a phenomenon like empathy it is almost impossible not to reason of its meaning or have explicit attitudes towards it through reflection (thereby both distancing oneself *and* present opinions or attitudes about it).

In retrospect I could have asked the participants for a situation where they experienced that they failed to empathize in their work (c.f. Håkansson 2003, p. 38). Several of the participants did however cover this topic without such a question.

During the interviews follow-up questions were asked in order to get the participants to develop their thoughts on themes as they were unfolding, especially when these were kept from being developed by the participant. Questions were asked spontaneously by always focusing on something that the participant already had touched upon in their narrative earlier; moving forward in a direction already chosen by the participant (Davidson 2003, p. 69). By following the participant’s experience and not asking questions unrelated to the experience, a phenomenological empathic attitude was maintained.

Often statements<sup>3</sup> were framed as follow-up questions given as a sort of feedback to the participant. This was inspired by Englander’s (2014) guidelines to phenomenological empathy training. Information is continuously verified assuring proper understanding of what has been said. The participant may rejoice in or deny the statement, either way the person will most likely continue explaining what was meant, thus elaboration is encouraged (id., p. 23). Davidson (2003, p. 69) wants us to refrain from using questions that can be answered by “yes” or “no” since it may result in short and poor answers. In this case, however, we can see that it can be

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<sup>3</sup> E.g. ”You mean that you felt upset when your client told you that you were unfair to her.”

clearly motivated to refrain from this advice as long as the participant are inspired to speak freely. “[...] encouraging participants to elaborate on their own answers is more important than framing specific prompts as follow-ups to open-ended questions.” (id., p. 81). The principals are there to help us listen (Davidson p. 91-92), not be followed slavishly.

In relation to interview question three (c) it was proven difficult to have the participants prepare experiences of the phenomenon to describe during the interviews. Even though all the participants were given thorough instructions beforehand and reminded through email about the importance of this preparation, some forgot (P1, P2); or had several experiences that were not necessarily connected (P1, P2, P5); or had trouble to in detail focus on their chosen experiences (P5). This can just be explained by the researcher’s inexperience in both interviewing as well as using a phenomenological method. Even if the material is deemed unfocused at times, it is all the same rich. Therefore no interviews were removed from analysis.

It is time to go back to the research questions and discuss them in comparison to the interview questions:

1. In what ways does interpersonal understanding appear in the participant’s experience of working with their clients? (further referred to as ‘I’)
2. What does the concept of empathy mean for the participants in their work? (II)
3. Are there any given ambiguities in the participants understanding of the meaning of empathy that shows in situations where interpersonal understanding is present? (III)

The participants’ experiences of expressing empathy are expected to be knowledgeable, what they have learned about empathy by colleagues, through education or in everyday life will be part of their natural attitude (Research question I - interview question a). This is complemented with other aspects that the participants may find relevant when talking about empathy in their work: what may hinder or facilitate empathy and how empathy is placed in relation to other activities and so on (II-b). Each participant’s explicit definition of empathy is expected to be a naïve account of the phenomenon in relation to the phenomenological concept. It is exactly this naïve approach to the phenomenon that we are looking for. However, it is expected that the phenomenological definition of empathy is in line with the participant’s experience of being empathic but implicitly, what is shown in their

empathic actions without them focusing on it. In other words, we seek what the participants are doing when turned to their experiences (c) and how this differ from what they say they are doing (I-a/II-b). If the participants would claim to use perspective-taking in being empathic at work, but on the other hand show clear signs of doing something else rather than perspective-taking that instead can amount to the phenomenological concept, then the participants are driven by a definition that is not in line with their expression of empathy. Hence they are being ambiguous towards the phenomena (III). If there is clear correlation between signs of phenomenological empathy in the experiences of the participant's expression of empathy implicitly but not explicitly this would entail that there is a confusion to what empathy is. The finding of this study might remedy that confusion while challenging its own or other definitions of empathy held evident.

## 4.4 Ethical considerations

Guiding for the study were the four essential ethical principles proposed in the ethical codex for humanities and social sciences by the Swedish Research Council (Vetenskapsrådet 2014). The participants took part of these principals both latter and prior to commencing the interview. (1) The participants took part of the purpose of the study. (id., p. 7); and had to give their consent to participating (2). They were informed that they participated on their own free will and could choose to terminate their participation at any time during the process (2). (id., p. 9-10). (3) The participants were also informed of the call for confidentiality and that it would be preserved by the removal of their names and any other information in the data that could identify them or any other person they might share information of (id., p. 12). (4) Lastly, the participants were informed that the data is continuously to be used for research purposes only (id., p. 14).

Describing the data as thoroughly as possible is of great importance for the phenomenological method. The purpose of this rigor is mainly for securing a level of certainty to the results but these considerations also provides positive consequences for ethical aspects. Respecting the experiences of the participant by evading “controversial interpretations [my translation]” (Vetenskapsrådet 2014, p. 15) is

practiced in omitting from speculation as well as providing the possibility for the participants to clarify certain passages in a follow-up interview.

## 5. Findings

First presented to the reader is the essential structure of empathy, as explicated through analysis of the data (c.f. Stein 1917/1989). In order to substantiate the findings the essential structure is followed by three themed sections consisting of a wide selection of vignettes from the interviews along with clarifying notes.

As opposed to the analyzing process, the reductions are not engaged in the presentation of the findings. However, in order to convey the reader of the possibility to understand the data without engaging with theoretical prose, the findings are presented *as they are* without any reference to literature.

Only the vignettes relevant to the explication of the essential structure of empathy are presented in the findings. To present the data in verbatim to the reader, as elsewhere suggested (c.f. Giorgi 2009; Giorgi 1992, p. 121), has advantages in regard to descriptive criteria. The partial presentation of the data in this thesis is defended by spacious constraints. In order to offer transparency, sections not amounting to the essential structure are although consequently presented if being especially meaning bearing for an individual narrative, or just generally nuancing the explicated constituents.

### 5.1 The essential structure of empathy

Empathy explicitly presents itself as conveyance of one's intention to understand the other. It is characterized by attendance, as in being bodily present and listen to the other. As a lived experience empathy is sentient and motivational, as in driven by a sense of agency as well as having a qualitative feature. It is about understanding the other as other. Empathy likewise amounts to the empathizer's wish to understand the other's expression and what it means. Also this aspect holds a qualitative feature. Empathy consists of recognition of the other's experiences as unique and personal, grounded in that the experiences of the other cannot be fully fathomable or accessible to the empathizer. On the other hand of the continuum a sensation of commonness is always present. The participants show expressions of direct understanding, an understanding that one is not always aware of. Empathy is depicted as an important ability in the participants' work with forced migrants. It

facilitates the building of trusting relationships which are held meaningful in the work. The participants are ambiguous to the phenomenon of empathy which is shown in the discrepancy between explicit and implicit meanings.

## 5.2 Empathic expressions

One of the overarching themes of the data was as to how the participants express empathy to their clients – the *doing* of empathy as a sentient act – both seen in their salient reflections on how they went along when being empathic and what could be drawn out implicitly from their empathic experiences.

### **P3**

For P3, empathy is expressed at work through attendance by listening and being present in the encounter with the other:

I listen. I am present. I am available in the meeting. I am *in* the meeting.  
I think that enables me to convey a feeling of “I am here”, “I listen” and  
I think this is a good way to start when one wants to be empathic or  
when one wants to convey a sense of empathy. (P3)

By conveying a sense of empathy P3 places importance on empathy as it is received by the other. She wants the other to know that she is empathizing with the other.

When P3 later was asked to articulate how this presence is performed she stresses the removal of interfering noises. It is also clear in P3’s answer that empathy is about focusing on the other, to give time and room for the other and to listen, not just passively but, actively:

Eye contact. Nothing else around that interrupts. I never have my phone with me in meetings but instead I am with them. I am in the room. I am nowhere else. I cannot be interrupted by something else. So to actively listen, to follow up what is said. (P3)

To be there and nowhere else is what P3 finds important to empathy. She wants to make sure that nothing can disturb the presence. She listens actively by asking questions. She is not passive in the encounter.

When P3 is asked to share an experience from work where she felt she had understood a client by empathizing, in relation to interview question C (further referred to as 'c') she brings up the feedback she received from one of her clients. P3 explains that her client expressed that there was something special with her in comparison to other adults:

'But this conversation with this grownup is not working. This one is, they just don't listen and they explain in a way where I don't understand. But you, [P3], when you talk to me, then I understand.' And then I, then I thought: "Okey, but tell me: What is that I do that is different in this specific case?" and then he told me that I take the time, that I listen in a way where I, when you can see that I am interested, that I want to know.(P3)

And then he said: "You understand" and then I thought "Yes! [...]  
Maybe that is it? Maybe it is not about understanding." that you actually know exactly what the other is going through but what is empathic about it is that I *actually want* to understand. (P3)

In the feedback from the client it is clear that he thinks that P3 understands and really wants to understand because she interested. Later P3 states that her client observed that she stayed with him though he knew that some of the things he talked about were not pleasant to listen to. He appreciated her devotion. There is a motivational quality to P3's listening and presence. P3 *actually wants* to understand, something that she expressed that her client picked up as genuine compared to others.

P3 puts her empathy in perspective with other activities:

You get to hear a lot of things in these meetings and some things you can do something about while other things you cannot do, but you are still supposed to listen. (P3)

She does have to act upon what she has understood empathically.



## **P2**

Just as P3, P2 is empathic by listening and being present, but relates to personal experience:

So for me it is much about that I listen and that I am there. I don't need to say that much. I understand what he is going through and the whole procedure with being new in the country and not knowing the language, because I have been there myself once. (P2)

P2 knows how it can be to be in that situation. Following this, P2 starts sharing his own story about his migration journey. He explains that it was a shock for him to come to a new country.

P2 anticipates his client's needs, moreover stressing the power of presence in his work:

What was good for me was to have a safe haven, to feel that you are not completely alone. And when I work with the boys, it is enough that I just sit down with them for two hours. I don't have to make a sound. They can just sit and play "Candy Crush" on the phone and I sit next to them. (P2)

In addition to the above, P2 does elsewhere also put emphasis on physical contact and state that "everybody needs some kind of closeness and security" (P2). Empathy for P2 is moreover to be "very honest and straight" (P2). "[...] It makes [the boys] react positively [...]" (P2), because they know where they have him.

The experience P2 was asked to share (c) is about his personal experience of anxiety attacks and how he uses that experience in his work to reach out to one of his clients. P2 expounds that his clients make difference between P2's and other professionals' ability to empathize:

What they use to say is "Yeah, I am so god damn tired of counselors and social services workers because they say: 'we understand', 'we understand' but it is like a doll. They sit there and nod and say 'I understand' and 'it is hard'." And it is comforting for them when someone else comes and say "I know. Because I had it myself ten years ago, five years ago" and then it becomes different for them. It becomes

more trustworthy, more authentic. “He really understands me because he has experienced it [...]” (P2)

For P2 sharing a personal experience changes the quality of the interaction. We will later return to the implications of being able to share a personal experience when empathizing. For now, emphasis is just put on the quality aspect that empathy has for P2. “He *really* understands me [...]” (P2) as opposed to the other professionals who just say that they understand, while not being convincing.

#### **P4**

Even though P4 finds it challenging she brings up the act of listening and being present as well as the authentic aspect when describing how she is going along when being empathic in her work:

Wow. How difficult to explain but I try to show that I care and that I understand without [...] treading on their toes [...] I try not to say that I understand because it may, can come off as provocative [...] but I try to show it in different ways and to show that I really am there with all that is me and that I listen [...] No, but to help the other so, as much as I can without at the same time making promises I cannot keep. I don't know. It is hard to answer so concretely and it is different in different situations, what it is about and how I show it [...] (P4)

There are several salient meanings in P4's vignette. Firstly, empathy is hard to explain and tricky to grasp because of its contextual nature. Secondly, empathy amounts to understanding, but also to care for the other – which is a new aspect not seen in the other cases – while all along respecting the other's integrity. Thirdly, P4 focuses on how stating that one understands the other may inflict upon the relationship rather than strengthen it. In comparison, P4 is sensitive to not commit the same mistake as the non-genuine social workers that P2 were referring to above. Furthermore empathy is expressed by P4 as *doing* and not just talking; to establish that you truly are present and that you listen. Lastly, being dependable and trustworthy is held forth as important in that you need to keep your promises.

As we can see P4 focuses on listening and presence as expressions of empathy, just like P2 and P3. When inclined to ask P4 to be more precise and in detail explain in what ways she expresses presence towards her clients she answered:

Sit down with them. Not too far away [...] but not too close and [...] show that I am there and not playing around with the phone or, like, do other things [...] but that I am there with all my mind; that I look at the person and, like, exist there [...] (P4)

This statement can be compared to P3 and her separation between really being there, in opposite to just being spatially with the other in the same room.

Additional ways for P4 to show empathy was to engage in different activities. In P4's shared experience (c) she talks about how playing games and having fun together helped to distract her client from his hurtful experiences: "[...] get him to not think about it all the time [...]" (P4). Occasionally P4 and her client talked about serious issues but also "[...] about things that were totally different [...]" (P4). P4 is ambiguous in regards to what empathy is and what it is not.

In P4's shared experience this client she first met were soon to be accompanied by his siblings. P4 explains how she repeats sentences in order to show to her clients that she understands:

And then also, another way to listen, well, to try and exchange the words, like, that you show that you care in other ways and to verify. I did that a lot with these siblings, verified a lot of what they said and like repeated some sentences [...] "When you are there you feel like this", "Yes" and that shows that I have listened [...] If you cannot ask follow-up questions then maybe you have not listened that much. (P4)

P4 also further differentiate what the opposite would be:

If I tell something to someone and that person just say "Oh, but I understand" but does not show that he or she understands and that he or she cares then it ma,- I do not feel it that much. Then it is mostly words. I have to show it with action otherwise I do not believe it. (P4)

Like the other participants P4 exemplifies someone who is non-genuine.

## P5

Similar to P4 and her consequential approach to promises, it is also central for P5 to be clear with what one can and cannot do for the clients; as well as listen and to be present to them:

I listen actively to what they are saying or what they want to talk about and I describe what I as an official can do and where they can turn with the problems that they have [...] then if it is something very serious, that, that they, then I give them space and time to talk about it here but I also need to explain that it might not be the right place, and sometimes I also need to inform that I cannot help out with those problems or find some solution to them. But sometimes one needs to lighten one's heart and have someone else carry that which one has been through. I guess that is what you can call empathy – to be there for people. (P5)

P5 expresses that being clear and transparent is of significance for the work with the asylum seekers but also to give room for letting the client talk and have someone else sharing the load. P5 expresses that there can be conflicts between letting someone talk and express empathy by listening *visa vi* her working role and area of responsibility. This we will return to in the next section. The limitations of the working role can however be set aside occasionally for some clients who have the need to talk. P5 is here as the empathizer the one who share the load of the other's hardships. Just as with the other participants she listens but presence is not clearly expressed. In the vignette we can see that she gives time and space and in the very last sentence she states that empathy is “[...] to be there for people.” (P5). But is this not to being available rather than being present?

If we look further, P5 expresses that touching also amounts to presence and empathy. In situations where the clients are crestfallen P5 can use her body to convey presence:

When a person feels very, very down and is, does not have someone with him/her, and reaches a point where they almost break down, you know? Then I can, like, feel that I can put my hand on their hand and transfer some kind of strength or that: “I see you, I am here and it is okay that you cry” [...] It is like this silence or just to be together in this though situation. (P5)

P5 explains that it is something she does exclusively in special situations, that there is nothing sexual about it. P5 later states in addition to the vignette above that she also tries to be sensitive to cultural differences. She does not shake hands with men from certain countries if they do not take initiative because she knows that it may not be part of their tradition to shake hands with the opposite sex.

In another vignette P5 says:

Well, sometimes there are children who come here with their parents who are very old and frail and have difficulties to walk. And then they do not need to come to the disc but can sit out there on, on one of the chairs in the waiting room. And the child gets to bring the forms to the parents and then the parents sign of and then [the children] run back to us at the counter [...] that you can also call empathy, I guess: that we do not force them to stand when they cannot. (P5)

It is an example of how consideration for the clients also can be seen as some form of empathy.

P5 does not explicitly express that there is a genuine quality to empathy but she does so implicitly. P5 explains that silence can be used when being empathic, not just to hear what the other is saying but to make the other share more by giving time for the other to reflect. P5 is clear that you must sense when it is a "[...] comfortable silence or a penetrating one or one that is permissive [...]" (P5), just as with the sensitivity of appropriateness of touching. She gives an example of what can happen when one takes time to be silent:

I have experienced that several times, that more will come after this silence and instead of just saying: "Well, then we do not got more to talk about with each other today" and then we are done, you know? That you haste it. But if you take it a little easy eventually more will come. (P5)

While P5 may focus on silence as a professional technique to in a more successful manner provide people with room to share their thoughts, something else can also be elicited from this vignette. By giving us an example of someone who does not wait and see, someone who is impatient and eager to "wrap up" a conversation there is a difference in quality to the act of listening.

When P5 is talking about strategies to cope with the emotional aspect of work she discerns that “[...] some colleagues are very bureaucratic, cold and maybe it is their way to survive [...]” (P5). She describes how one time a colleague’s client fainted and her colleague panicked and left the meeting. Although P5 focuses on the hardship of the work there is also here an implicit meaning present. If empathy amounts to presence, then leaving a room amounts to absence. There are different ways of being present and to listen, where some gives better results than others. When P5 explains how she is when she is empathic she says that she is *actively* listening, not just listening. We should be careful to draw the premature conclusion that active listening is about conveying authenticity, but P5 does implicitly differentiate between different forms of presence and different forms of listening that may yield different results.

## **P1**

P1 expresses himself in a similar fashion to P4. Caring for his client is his duty in the line of work:

Empathy [...] would be some kind of compassion and that, that sync you in some way. So how do I do when I am empathic in my work? Well, is for example, yes mainly, that I feel some kind of obligation or some kind of higher, also some inner genuine determination so solve someone else’s problem. And, like, that it is syncing with the body [...] also to listen and to be there, I guess, is also some kind of practice of empathy, that you in some way share someone else’s problems and someone else’s suffering. (P1)

“Syncing with the body” was a passage that was not followed up during the interview. In complementary clarification P1 explains that “syncing with the body” amounts to creating an emotional bond with the other through identification. For P1, listening and presence is mentioned later, almost in passing, as a practice of empathy. Explicitly he puts less weight on these acts as opposed to compassion and emotional bonding (“syncing”). At several times in the interview P1 is ambiguous towards the phenomenon, showing difficulty delimiting empathy from sympathy.

P1, like P5, also uses his hands to convey empathy. P1 tells about an experience when he sits with a client in the reception room of a psychiatric clinic. To be by someone's side, being there for the other is what P1 wants to express:

And there you sit in the waiting room and see someone shake, like, and even if you do not like, do something [puts his hand on my – the interviewer's – knee] I just, you know, put my hand on the knee and “Do you know that, hell, I *walk* with you?”. That does extremely much for the empathy. (P1)

Being present and walking by someone's side amounts to being empathic for P1.

When P1 was quoted above in regards to how he is being empathic, he stated that empathy for him is to *genuinely* wanting to solve other people's problems. This is followed up elsewhere in his interview. P1 elaborates further that empathy is also to involve yourself genuinely:

[...] When you have shook hands and seen someone in the eyes then comes – well – the empathy, like, and then you feel, like, that you more genuinely want to involve yourself in a case, like, when you have a face and when you have seen the children laugh and things like that. (P1)

When you have met the person empathy becomes stronger.

P1 returns to authenticity implicitly when describing how language is important in email conversation and that it is harder to emphasize with people unable to express themselves at length. When he receives a well written email it makes him want to write a longer answer:

But If I get some kind of mail, like this: “Need to marry. How to do – question mark” or like, or if I get something like a long, you know, well-articulated, if it is like this: “Well, hi!” like when someone explains their situation, like – and it can just be a simple thing like this: where you were born; and how long [you went to] school; and if you manage, like, if you know what google translate is or like that. It matters for my motivation, like how lengthy I would reply or like that. Because I can write three A4 pages and I can write three sentences [...] (P1)

P1 opens up a new dimension to authenticity; that his motivation is depending on what he receive from a client. Either it can be about the client making an effort, or as he states elsewhere in the interview, that a shared language makes it easier to relate to one another on a deeper level. Many times during P1's interview he returns to the phrase 'go the last mile' when talking about putting in extra effort in trying to help someone. Devotion is important for P1.

Nowhere does P1 talk about genuine listening or genuine presence or compares himself to non-genuine colleagues. Rather P1 differentiate between how he is with certain clients compared to other clients. However, P1 does show, both explicitly and implicitly, that authenticity is an important part of his broader sense of empathy and his work. Moreover, that authenticity as the quality of the empathy can also depend on the client.

### 5.2.1 *Summary*

All the participants touch upon the acts of being present with and listening to their clients when explaining what they do when being empathic. Attendance to the other is in other words universal to empathy when tending to the data. This becomes the lowest common denominator across the five interviews. For example caring for or engaging in leisure activities (P4); problem solving and showing compassion (P1); or carrying someone else's burden (P5), could not be explicated as constituents to the essential structure of empathy since none of them were present in every case. This helps to distinguish what empathy is and what it is not.

When tending to the experiences the participants were asked to share (c) it becomes clear that the participants hear what their clients are saying and that they have been in the same room as their clients while listening. They are always listening and being present in some way. However, all the participants differentiate explicitly or implicitly to a grade of quality when empathizing; that just being present is different from being *really* present (P2, P3, P4); or that you can be more or less empathic compared to how colleagues are (P2, P5); or how oneself act different between clients (P1). While saying that authenticity could be explicated among all of the participants, would be to force disclosure. A quality aspect to empathy, however, is ubiquitous. There is an aspect of effort to empathy that is essential. Empathy is driven by a motivational force.



What is also clear is that the participants emphasize how empathy is perceived by the other. The focus lie on how the acts of listening and presence is received as an empathic gesture and devotion of the professional towards the client. The quality aspect is making the other understand that you want to understand. Empathy is a significant ability in the work, used as a tool to show that you are sincere and that you are devoted to the other and the work.

### 5.3 Empathy and the work role

The participants are in every case discerning conflicts between their work and private life. Because of this, this theme, along with adjacent meanings presented, was given its own section.

#### **P2**

P2 explains the importance of not being too private at work since that helps to cope with the occasional harassments you receive from clients. If you can maintain a professional posture you will not take things personal and the posture will help you carry out your work of helping your clients. P2 even says that he stops being a person when he is professional:

When you walk in through the door you stop to exist as a person and you become a professional member of the staff [...] when you have that attitude you can help the teenagers to succeed better. Because if I don't take it personal: the attacks, the words and the threats I receive, then I can help them in an easier way. Because then it just bounces of me and it runs of [...] Even if I would feel much for one of the guys and I suffer with him so will-, I could not become too private. Because there is a line and I cannot cross it, because if I cross it today that relationship could be ruined [...] I will not just be a safe haven but I will become a buddy and in this line of work being just a buddy does not work. (P2)

P2 shoulders a professional role that is important for the worker-client relationship. Elsewhere P2 defines being professional as a strive for objectivity; a combination of theoretical knowledge and intuition as well as sensitivity built up by experience of

practical work. The relationship aspect is something that P2 returns to many times during his interview. For P2, sharing an experience amounts to empathy and it is something that strengthens the relationship and the alliance with the client. Trust is regarded as an important element to the relationship and is an outcome of an empathic approach. Sharing a similar personal experience with the client creates more trust than anything else: ” ’But was it like that for you too?’ because you receive more trust when you get to share your version, too.” (P2). The relationship enables one to carry on and make progress in the work.

P2’s technique that is described above becomes exemplified when P2 shares an experience from work:

I have one guy who I sat down and talked with, about two, three weeks ago [...] When they left Somalia they were eleven boys – friends since childhood. When they got to Sweden they were two and he had seen [all the others] die in front of his eyes and it was a one and a half year long journey. And he tells me how certain events occurred and I was, and there you just disconnect. Because it is like a small button, you switch off and you switch on, when you are at work and when you are not [...] You cannot be too personal with them. Just too, like, private. Because you will burn yourself out. (P2)

As we can see there is an attitudinal shift in P2’s expression. It is more about not being *too* personal than ceasing to be a person all together. The vignette above entails that it might not be just about staying professional in order to help the client more efficiently. Being over-involved in the other emotionally can wear you down. Therefore being professional is also about protecting yourself, not just from harassments and harsh words but also from the experiences of the client.

Even if P2 has a method for not getting too emotionally involved with his clients it does not always help:

In my work I try to not show too much, too much emotion because I get afraid when I hear their stories [...] sometimes I feel down when I drive home and need to, like, take a walk for an hour just to rid myself of everything I have heard and what they have been exposed to. (P2)

When asking how P2 combines the term empathy with the narrative of how he works P2 does not seem to find any conflict between them:

You shall feel, you shall understand, you shall know but you shall not take theirs and make it into yours [...] Those are his feelings and one has to validate them. You have them and they are there and it is true and it is because of this, but you cannot let yourself be sucked in too much in it [...] And it is, it is terribly difficult. (P2)

Remembering P2's definition of empathy it was about understanding what the other is going through. Even when you try to be professional instead of personal, you can still show understanding and thereby be empathic, according to P2 – even if it is very difficult to not get sucked in. The experiences are those of the client, they are not yours and you should not make them yours.

Let us also return to P2's experience (c) of when he shared his own experience of anxiety attacks with a client to convey a sense of authenticity:

But then again, there it is also important in a conversation like that not to become too private or too personal. You use your own experiences as a tool to help them and make them realize. But it should not be like two buddies sitting and chatting about some, some feeling they both have had. (P2)

The conversation has a professional purpose, not a casual one and the sharing of the experience is an intervention.

### **P3**

If we turn to P3, she also differentiates between being personal or private and professional, but P3 also see how empathy is a commodity that you can have more or less of at any given moment:

When I wake up in the morning [I have] a certain dose of empathic ability, like having a backpack. Then I go to work. Then it depends on how the day develops. Then this backpack can be emptied [...] Because later then I am, if I have had too many demanding counseling sessions, then I am not that empathic in the last meeting. If I feel well I can do a

good job and for me to do a good job I have to be present in a meeting.

(P3)

Empathy is presence and presence is necessary. As P3 states elsewhere: “it must not run out”. She needs empathy to be able to do a good job, implicitly underlining the importance of empathy just as P2.

P3 talks about how she, during one summer when they were understaffed, had to conduct many subsequent counseling sessions with newly arrived unaccompanied minors:

I met many, many teenagers and got to hear a lot of flight stories and a lot of misery, both physical as well as mental and sexual abuse. Time and time again, every day under a certain period of time. At that time I felt pretty exhausted [...] I had to recover when I got home and there I think you have to have, that this backpack empties if you do not fill it with something else, and something else for me is leisure time [...] As when I am at work, I am at work and then I am destined to do it as well as I can, as possible – considering the preconditions of course – but when I am not at work, I am *not* at work. (P3)

I think there is certain dosage, in how much one can cope when listening to misery. You have, you always have to fill up with positive energy or with positive, with strength to be able to give strength. Perhaps that is what empathy is all about: to give, give and take. (P3)

For P3 empathy is something that can run out because of the constant pressure of listening to the grave experiences of the clients. There are limits to what one can endure listening to and to how much empathy you can express during a day. But even if an empathic approach can be troublesome it is also something that can give strength.

Just as for P2, empathy is also important for P3 when building a relationship with her clients:

But at the same time I have to, at times make decisions that maybe not always are [...] very positive, but I can just because I have a good

relationship and [...] if you cannot show empathy you have poorer conditions to have a good relationship. (P3)

Because I always [need to be on the same page with the teenager], more or less: “But she has planned this [for me] because maybe it is better [for me] and after all, she actually knows better than I do.”, so that there is a trust [...] (P3)

Empathy helps to build a relationship and relationship increases trust.

## **P5**

P5 describes her working role as changing. That there is just a certain amount of time for each asylum seeker, during which a lot of information need to be passed on as well as asking the asylum seeker the formal questions of the asylum process. “There is very little room for the applicant to bring up their concerns” (P5). P5 explains it in the following way: “We do not have that much time for empathy right now. We got too much to do. And many of my colleagues are probably about to hit the wall. It is unsustainable.” (P5). P5 underlines the severity of the stressful situation. But she also states, in proximity to this statement in regard to not having her own cases, that it sometimes can be relieving to let bygones be bygones and start fresh with another applicant.

Turning to P5’s ability to empathize she is stating that even if there is little time for it, and that she can understand it as very hard for the clients if taking their perspective, it does not affect her ability to empathize: “It [...] does not affect my empathy for the applicants, but the applicants may experience that of which they, their worries are not taken seriously or that they, that it is not confronted, you know.” (P5)

This is ambiguous if compared to when P5 expressed the manner in which she is empathic: “I give them space and time to talk [...]”. Less time would then impact the ability to emphasize. As with the example of silence: that more will come if you let it. Hence, if you do not have time for silence then you will be missing out on what the client may want to express. But implicitly P5 acknowledge a problem that arises in the collision between empathy and organizational circumstances and this by focusing on the other, the receiver of empathy – the client – is the one being afflicted the most by the lack of time.

Just as P3, P5 expresses that empathy is empowering even if she acknowledges the hardship of constantly listening to the asylum seeker's experiences:

From time to time it can be really tough to listen to some of the things people have been through [...] sometimes I think that probably everyone who works here feel a little down. Then I am not one of them who brings [my work] with me home after all these years [...] (P5)  
Then you can always become tired [...]; or tired of looking at people; tired of hearing people; you can be tired of listening to your own voice. [...] But then empathy can also give one strength to push on because the applicants can say after a couple of years "Hi! It was you who were my case worker and you did this or you did that and you said this to me and that was a totally right thing to say" and I just "Wow" and barely recognize the person. (P5)

Just as P2, P5 also tries not to bring work with her home. It can be tough but P5 also recognizes the power of empathy as something that helps her to push on. The payback is meeting people that have recognized the empathy they received.

Though P5 has many different clients and not her own personal cases she also puts emphasis on how important a relationship with the client can be and the trust that can be developed through empathy. One experience that she shares in her interview is when she worked at a detention center for asylum seekers. P5 personally discovered that a client was in the act of trying to commit suicide. After his hospital visit they developed a stronger relationship, P5 says. After the incident he wanted to switch to another room and tidy it up. Because of the risk of escaping and self-injuring the client was not allowed to have a curtain rod over his window:

And then it hit me, that we could tear up a bed sheet and use that and, and, to pull on the curtains [...] and then another colleague asked: "How do you dare doing that? He is actually suicidal." "No", I said "No problem – right now it is not a problem and him-, he is totally focused on this and to clean and to start over." (P5)

And in some way we respected each other there too, you know. We knew, we knew where we had each other. (P5)

The trust that P5 showed her client resulted in that the client could trust her.

#### **P4**

Above, P4 uses the word *care* when describing herself as empathic. In P4's shared experience (c) she chose mainly to focus on an unaccompanied minor she felt she had developed a strong relationship with. Sometime later he was reunited with his siblings at P4's work place. It was "probably the most joyful, like, job moment, I think. Especially they, that they met again and everyone cried" (P4).

P4 and her colleagues started to work with all of the children and empathy was an important part of the work:

I also put in a lot of time with them. And I built, like, built a relationship with all three there, or like they talked a lot, a lot with me and I think that it, like, well, helped them [...] that we showed empathy and showed that we cared helped them to manage their everyday life; to manage school; that they ate, for example. (P4)

Empathy is clearly something important in P4's work and it helped her to fulfil the children's basic needs. She built a relationship with them. In proximity to the vignette above P4 says that showing empathy for the siblings resulted in trust: "It also makes it easier to be able to trust people and to be able to; to dare to talk; to be able to open up; and show your emotions, I think." (P4).

P4 says that empathy gives her meaning and that without it her job would be less meaningful.

But I think that [empathy] [...] helped me, to give me a meaning, or like, to understand [...] If one does not care that much or show that much empathy in a job like this I think it is not that meaningful to be there. In that case you can work with something else. To be able to feel empathy and to be able to show it in a workplace such as this one also gives me meaning in my job and in my life. (P4)

For P4 the instrumental value of empathy – to be able to carry out your job – is toned down in favor of deeper values.

In the interview with P4 she does not anywhere bring up empathy explicitly as problematic or tough for herself emotionally but she highlights how her working role

can collide with what she is allowed and not allowed to do: “It was maybe hard for [the siblings] because they wished that we, that I and that we would do a lot of things that we did not have authority to do so it was like, it was, yeah but it was educational but it was hard [...]” (P4). The expectations of the clients did not always meet the remit of P4 and her colleagues working roles. It was a challenge but showing empathy and showing care was important to not let the children think the workers were indifferent to them.

When nothing happens they thought that [...] we did not care but there we really had to try, got to really try to pitch in and show that we cared even if we did not, that we, like, felt empathy for them even though we could not hurry up the [asylum] process [...] It was a challenge.

In the beginning of the interview P4 stress the difference between her private life and her role while she is working.

There have been teenagers that I have been really worried about and that have moved from us [...] privately with friends I would have called and went there [...] when it is about the work I cannot act in that way and I can't leave them my number. (P4)

At her work she has laws and rules that restrict her from doing more.

Returning to the boy (c), the first of the siblings that P4 got to know and felt the most empathic with, we can see that it is troublesome for P4 to combine the limiting nature of the working role with the relationship she developed with him:

[...] He awoken a lot of empathy within me. And I really, I went in really, really much for him, almost a little too much I think [...] we developed such a good, like, relationship at work so that, and he relied a lot on me I think. Almost that [he] felt like a brother. (P4)

The relationship is held important to P4 and became almost too personal. On a follow-up P4 was asked to clarify what she meant with “[...] a little too much [...]” (P4) since this was not elaborated during the interview. P4 explained that the boy and the other siblings just wanted to be with her and no one else, making it hard for her to give the same attention to the other clients as she did for them.



Implicitly P4 express struggling with reconciling with the working guidelines but she never brings up empathy as problematic in her work. Explicitly P4 never talks of her job as emotionally tough, listening to the tragic experiences of her clients, but implicitly it is shown that her job is emotional, she was the most joyful in her work when the siblings were united.

## **P1**

P1 is very clear with the importance of empathy in his work as asylum activist stating that it “is a [...] fuel” (P1) in the work. P1 also links empathy to charitable interests and that it is his duty to help relieve the problems of the asylum seekers. In this way P1 and P4 have similar approaches to empathy. It is not just a professional tool but something that comprises their lives as a whole. It is P1’s duty to help out of bad conscience and to compensate for how his country treats the asylum seekers:

Because I live in Sweden it has come creeping more and more [...] some kind of feeling of guilt too. It feels a little like I am part of a society that still, like, kind of, stand – even if I personally do not do that it is the society and my country men who in some way stand – for politics where it is totally reasonable that people die here while [we] weigh in political interests. (P1)

I also feel that it is, as well as it is resting on willpower it is also resting on some kind of obligation. That is the way I would like to put it. And, well, it is some kind of small sense of shame I feel, like. (P1)

His will to show empathy is driven by a sense of guilt.

In P1’s chosen experience (c) he talks about his work with two undocumented families who were forced to share the same house due to a misunderstanding. The families got into a drawn out conflict with each other and P1 found it hard to stay objective and not take sides. The organization P1 represented provided the shelter as well as the monetary resources the families needed to sustain their living:

We have limited resources so we really had to, like, split as pragmatic as possible and the other family got jealous. We assessed that no one, that one of the families did not have the same need of the money and we could just give away a certain amount of money. We gave it to the other

family and then it ended up with them turning on each other, and turned to me to tell on each other [...] So it became like a race, a little bit it felt like, which of them who could treat me the most for coffee, which of them who could treat me this and that and then they wanted their own small moments with me, you know, alone time drinking coffee. It was so freaking hard [...] being professional. (P1)

P1 gets caught in between the families and finds it difficult to handle.

As he starts to form a more profound relationship with one of the families it affects his view on his working role to the point where he asks himself if he is a professional or if he is a friend:

It is also like that, blurred roles of conflict to some extent, like, when I sit there and eat dinner, like [...] I am here as asylum rights activist or like a buddy, you know? Should I charge the conveyance account from [my organization] or should I pay from my own [...] private account and I just do not get it [...] I work as a contact person and it is so freaking strange: am I contact person or am I a friend, you know? (P1)

All through the interview P1 returns to that he would like a less involved relationship with the undocumented immigrants he help, because it can be emotionally tough to engage with people on that deep level and to “go that extra mile”. For P1 the more you engage in someone’s life emotionally, the more empathy you feel for that person.

Building a strong relationship is something that P1 treasures and he returns to it all through the interview in relation to empathy. But dependence can also be a burden:

It is this whole: put your must’s and do’s and desires in proportion to someone else’s must’s and do’s and desires and know that you can be a last life-line and still be able to motivate myself to do some kind of seminar task tomorrow when I know they are out on the streets and wait for me to go get them and they do not have anyone else to call it is, it does not hold up and do that weigh-in if you think, like: “what is the most important?” (P1)

P1 expresses some degree of involvement as unmanageable and that you cannot take on too many clients and be equally involved in every case. He continues to explain that it is not possible to always prioritize his clients because it would create too many problems for himself. P1 concludes: “[...] keep the distance or just have one case, like. That are the two you got to choose between. You cannot go in like a friend with everyone, like. It does not work.” (P1).

On the other hand a strong relationship can be fruitful. It is strengthening to get involved: “To succeed with what you do and feel like: ‘Damn, we did this’. That increases the motivation [...]” (P3).

P1 also talks of trust several times in his interview. When P1 does things together with his clients, as for example when he gathers food from containers by “dumpster diving” (P1) together with a group of Romanian immigrants, it “[...] does a hell of a lot just for that mutual trust, too.” (P1). P1 expresses elsewhere that when he had trouble trusting his clients, when he experienced he was being lied to, this negatively affected his motivation to show empathy.

### *5.3.1 Summary*

When it comes to participants view on empathy contra the working role we can see that for example P1’s experience of guilt and duty; or P4’s caring aspect (also mentioned by P3 and P1) are not found across all the participant’s different narratives. What can be found in all of the cases are that the participants problematize the relationship between their work life and private life; that working with the clients is emotional and there is a risk of being over-involved or overly affected by the experiences of the forced migrants. What can be generalized is that empathy is not merely a catalyst in this emotional aspect of the work. Some of the participant experienced empathy as both strength-giving and fatiguing (P1, P3, P5) while others did not experience a conflict (P2, P4). Empathy is all the while regarded as hard to practice but important in the work.

The goal of establishing relationships and mutual trust with your clients was held in high regard across all interviews, empathy helped to accomplish this.

## 5.4 The recognition of the other

Above it is concluded that there is a qualitative aspect to empathy – how *well* the participants show their empathy. But empathy is not just a way to convince the other of one's effort and devotion to their experiences, there is also the element of understanding these experiences.

### **P1**

For P1 relating or identifying with his clients is paramount in order to reach understanding:

But then also that that I think the key to empathy, for me, is also some form of recognition of yourself in that person. That is when I can really feel empathy, like that. It is the more you, like, socialize and get to know a person, like, the more you recognize yourself in that person. Then it can, like, vary even if a person is roughly, like, in a similar situation if I can identify more with one person I feel much more empathy is some way, too. (P1)

P1 can feel more empathy if he has something he shares with the other.

We have already seen how P1 felt trapped between the two families he wanted to support (c). A friendship grew between himself and the father in one of the families. They shared the similar sensation of insufficiency in their lives. P1 recognized his own father in his client and therefore identified himself with his client's situation, which in turn helped P1 to empathize:

[...] I myself have a father that kind off also have, I mean the same personality type or, how should I put it? My dad also has that, you know, manly-man [...] proud, should take care of everything, you know? Strong. Money. [...] so I think empathy comes with that I myself feel like that and understand him and I believe, in some way, that I am a splendid contact person for him because that I myself have the same problems or that I would feel precisely like he feels in the exact same situation and that is maybe more motivating, this little masculinity thing [...] (P1)

Now it has resulted in that I, kind off, see him as one of my best friends, though considering he is close to 40 and I am [in my twenties] and we have totally different conditions, we, he talks limited English. I believe empathy comes on very strong there because there I can feel extreme empathy and it comes from that I can identify with him in some way.  
(P1)

Many meanings given in these two vignettes have already been addressed, for example motivation. What is interesting here is the power of identification for P1 in sharing values and a shared sense of expectations on gender roles. P1 thinks that he would have the same experience as his client if he would be put in the exact same situation. P1 can relate with how his client must feel.

But in what situations are P1 not able to relate or identify with his clients?  
Language and cultural distance has an impact on P1's empathy:

[...] Now I am honest here, like, and it is, I feel a little ashamed that it is like this but, I also thought of, like, when we have Afghan families or Persian like Farsi or Dari, that you talk with also, then, I cannot, like, identify myself with that as much but maybe, an English speaking person from the Balkans – that is still Europe – instead of someone from Kabul, you know? [...] But then of course I always feel some sort of basic empathy, that “Your situation sucks, I feel sorry for you” like. But I do not know how these emotions in some way-, are not communicated on the same level, you know? (P1)

There is some kind of basic empathy for P1. Later, P1 explains that we are “[...] exposed to the same expectations by society [...]”. P1 also says in the beginning of the interview: that identification makes you realize that “[...] it could just the same be you or me.”. People, regardless of cultural background, are similar to each other. There is a commonness to this without the need for personal identification, even if the latter improves empathy, according to P1. In basic empathy P1 is rather identifying himself with the other in being human. That we all in some sense are the same.

P1's empathy, as feeling sorry for the other, could not, as we have already argued, be drawn out as a constituent to the essential structure of empathy. We then have to

find an implicit example of this basic empathy in the narrative that is in line with the essential structure of the phenomenon.

P1 shares his experience when he first meet with his significant client (c):

[...] I met him at [a Swedish city] central station, freshly out of the refugee camp. So they just arrived with all the stuff [...] I was supposed to get them but then I was in the middle of an exam period so I did not have the energy to go get them so they had to take the train down so I could come and get them at the station. And then I went to go get them and then I directly saw, like, all the luggage and the children and everything, like that “Shit, that I did not went and got them”. It was so much to carry, like, and I know how far it is from the migration facility or refugee camp to the central station. (P1)

Even if P1 did not know the man and his family, or their situation, he could still empathize with his situation in this moment. P1 directly understands how hard it must be to carry all the luggage. He is present to the family and in minimal sense empathic towards their situation by understanding it.

In the following vignette a sense of foundational understanding is also found, not as an example of the basic empathy that P1 suggests, but as an understanding of the other’s situation. It is a recognition of the others situation in an implicit sense while P1 focuses on identification with the father:

Now there was this Muslim holiday so I was over there and celebrated Bajram with them and it was like this that he had promised his daughter a bicycle: “I will get you a bicycle”. And every time I am there she cries like that and he comforts her a little: “Daddy will get you a bicycle, daddy will get you a bicycle” but if you [...] recycle cans and get 50 [SEK] from grandma, I mean, then a bicycle is a pretty big investment. And then, I felt an extreme urge, I mean, not to give the daughter maybe a bicycle but to, this man’s feeling to like be able to give his family something. (P1)

The vignette has two expressed meanings: P1 can empathize with the father’s feelings of insufficiency but P1 also recognizes the difficulty to buy a bicycle considering their economic situation.

## **P2**

If we turn to P2 we have already seen how he, in his chosen experience (c), used similar experiences as a tool in order to convey empathy to his client. But P2 also means that the shared experience made him understand his client. In the following vignette P2 compares it to eating dinner together:

It is like when you are talking, if we eat the same dinner and we talk about the dinner and we have the same taste buds [sic!]. Then we understand what we are talking about because we have experienced the same thing. And those counseling sessions, which I can truly understand and reconnect with what they are experiencing, are the best [...] (P2)

A similar experience makes empathy more profound.

In the following vignette we revisit the boy who lost his childhood friends on his journey to Sweden. P2 states his incapability to understand what his client is going through as he does not share a similar experience:

What the hell do I know about how it feels to see your childhood friend die in your arms? Never been through that. Intellectually I can understand, that it is traumatic; it is strenuous; it is horrible – yes – but if you start by going in to my own experience bank and search for a similar situation to truly understand. Nope, because I don't have one like that. Yes, I have seen my buddy get punched in the face but it is not the same thing. (P2)

P2 might not share the same experience but he can understand them intellectually even if this is not of the same quality as if he would share a similar experience with them. The intellectual understanding can be compared to the same basic empathy that P1 had when he could not relate to the other.

Below we find an implicit example from P2 of the intellectual understanding that is expressed in the vignette above:

We have taken these guys and put them in an synthetic environment that is very artificial because this is ten guys with different backgrounds that have experienced atrocities, that are supposed to live together and

respect each other and respect the staff and respect the housing rules  
around the clock [...] (P2)

While P2 might be focusing on the difficulty for the clients to meet the demands of the treatment home, he is implicitly understanding *how* it is difficult. He acknowledges their experiences and he understands their situation and that it might be difficult to follow the rules and always respect each other.

The difference between P2 and his clients is found in the unique experience we carry, as with his client's different backgrounds and what they have experienced that he cannot relate to, but there is still an understanding even if the other is regarded as different. In the same way as for P1, P2 is recognizing the difference between himself and his client and the uniqueness of their situation but at the same time admits there is sameness between them. This can also be seen in an example where P2 uses physical contact in his job, something that also P1 and P5 stress in their narratives. P2 explains that he hugs his clients since "everybody needs some kind of closeness and security" (P2). These are universal needs for all people.

Returning to the example of the taste buds P2 combines difference and sameness between himself and his clients:

I mean, all experiences one has are unique, because my experience is not yours and the same dinner that we sit and eat. I experience it in one way and you experience it in another way [...] But in the same way as it is unique there are, there are parts of the event that still are the same [sic].  
It is still the same plate, it is the same food we eat [...] you find components that belong together [...] (P2)

P2 summarizes, a recognition of the others experiences as different as well as focusing on a commonness with the other.

#### **P4**

When asking P4 to elaborate her experienced limitations to understanding the other, as in not understanding the other to the fullest extent, P4 says that it is not about understanding partially but rather about not understanding certain aspects of the experiences of unaccompanied minors all together. P4 is also differentiating between intellectual and emotional understanding:



[...] I really cannot understand these, how these teenagers are feeling  
[...] I think that one maybe also can talk about understanding in  
different ways. That I maybe can understand certain things from an  
intellectual perspective [...] I know how some things are and I know a  
little about how the journey can be and how it is in some of these  
countries [...] yeah, but maybe simply empathically understand that it  
must be really tough to lose your parents [...] but I don't think I can say  
that I emotionally understand how it is because I have never been in that  
situation [...] (P4).

P4 can understand intellectually through acquired knowledge but not emotionally since she is not sharing the same experience.

But there are things P4 can understand by just being human:

[...] So I think there is, that we humans. Yeah, but that we can feel  
understanding and empathy that is not built on knowledge, but how we  
are like, but to be human [...] that is built into us, like that. And how we-  
, our-, in a certain foundational, like, empathy and understanding and  
that we can understand [...] (P4)

At several times P4 explicitly expresses that her clients are humans. This keen observation is not about stating the obvious but to underline the worth of the forced migrants. As P4 state elsewhere: empathy is about “[...] every people's equal worth [...]” as opposed to feeling pity or feeling sorry for someone.

The commonness that P4 explicitly express that she shares with her clients is also supported implicitly in her narrative when we return to the work with the siblings. P4 stresses that it was challenging for herself and her colleagues to make the siblings understand that an asylum process is time consuming. She received a statement from the professionals working with the asylum applications:

“You got, they got to have patience, we have, it will take...” for example  
“three months and we have no further information until then. We will  
keep in touch.” like that and so, so we told that to them and then they  
still wanted us to call again the day after and again, like that [...] and it

does not do anything [...] but they were really, really stressed. Which is not strange [...] (P4)

The sibling's reactions were frustrating but not strange. It was understandable for P4 that they acted the way they did and that they were stressed. Thus P4 is understanding her clients directly.

We have already seen that P4 underlines that showing understanding is more important than just saying that one understands. Moreover, one should be careful of saying that one understands since it may come off as provocative. P4 explains that even her clients are careful of saying that they understand each other even considering that they have similar life stories: "They have also talked about that they cannot either always understand each other, and say that they understand because they do actually not either have the exact same background." (P4). The conclusion that can be drawn is that it would not help P4 to fully relate or identify with her clients if she shared a similar experience. One must always be sensitive to the uniqueness of the others experiences since no two people are exactly alike.

### **P3**

P3 returns several times during her interview to that she can never know if she fully understands the other, hence empathy is rather an attitude of showing a will to understand rather than understanding per se. Returning to P3's shared experience (c) and the client who had a sensation that P3 understood him as opposed to other professionals. Even if the client felt understood P3 was uncertain if she really had understood him. "He thought that I understood", she says. When P3 was asked to elaborate further, her experience of not understanding her client to the fullest extent, it was the reasons of the actions of the client which she did not have access to and therefore could not understand: "Because it is not about that I do not understand the question of fact. It is rather about... I, I try to understand what lies behind things. Not always that which is expressed. It was *that* which I did not understand [...]". P3 continues to explain that her client seemed stuck in his resentment towards some people, that he felt they did not treat him the way they should because of his struggles and tough background. It was this that P3 could not understand, *why* he felt this way. P3 believes that you as a person have to take some sort of personal responsibility for your action towards others, meaning in this case that P3 in some sense rejected the her client's demand to be treated with a different respect and

consideration because of his tough experiences. P3 concludes: "I did not understand why this came up time and time again, but I guess I do not always need to". P3 seems to in some way feel inadequate in not being able to explain her client's intentions to the fullest but then reconcile that this may not be necessary for being empathic. As she says: "I can just listen, that he felt that I understood despite I felt that I did not know how to support him in this. Because it really does not matter what you do. It is rather about how the other person is experiencing it." (P3). She comes to terms that she may not know how to solve the other's problem, or at all need to solve it. By focusing on the other she does understand that he is angry with his situation. This is what she is present to by being empathic.

There are present ambiguities to how P3 relates to the word understanding. It is clear that there are certain things that P3 can learn and understand about the other. In the following P3 distinguish different forms of understanding even if she is limited in knowing exactly what the other is going through:

If for example, if a teenager tells me that the father has passed away then I can actually show my understanding for that, that I think it is sad by in fact say that I am sorry for the loss. This is a way of showing some kind of understanding for it being really tough but I cannot actually understand how it feels [...] I will never be able to do that if I have not myself been an unaccompanied minor. (P3)

P3 can understand that it must be tough to lose a parent but she cannot know what it feels like, just like she cannot understand how it is to be an unaccompanied minor because she does not have that experience herself. P3 is sensitive, just like P4, to state that she understands without really knowing if she has understood the other. However, even if P3 "cannot exactly understand how it feels" (P3) she does understand that it is tough. In a minimum sense it is safe to say that P3 has understood the other, at least to certain extent.

Knowledge of the other's background can also facilitate understanding:

Another way to show that one understands is to in fact prepare a little. If we meet an asylum seeker from another country, to in fact study that country. To know what to ask about, to be curious. [...] To in fact show that you are not totally new to-, [that] you know something about their heritage or about, about the country or the culture they come from. (P3)

In the vignette above P3 state that she wants to “know something” in order to understand the context which the other is coming from. “To show that one understands” there must be something that one has understood.

If her clients feel understood the purpose of empathy is fulfilled. The position to not claim total understanding of the other seems to amount to humbleness to the other’s unique experience, rather than claiming that one cannot understand anything since one cannot go beyond the sensations of understanding and enter the other to see if one’s guesses were right. There is a recognition of other’s experiences as unique. When P3 later was asked if having a similar experience would make her understand the other in a more profound way, she did not know.

As for sharing a commonness with her clients P3 is not as clear as the other participants. P3 does however express that “we are all social beings” when articulating another meaning (how her clients are not that used to being empathized with). It may seem obvious that P3 regards her clients as humans just as she and she share a commonness to them in that sense. Here again it is rather a question of value. In her interview this is present everywhere implicitly, in for example her aim “to be respectful” (P4) towards her clients in learning about their culture and that she “takes them seriously” (P4). Her regard of her clients as social beings, just as anyone else, strengthens her view on her clients being worthy her respect and her sincerity.

## **P5**

P5 is not explicitly saying that there is distance between herself and the other by differentiating the other’s experience as unreachable or not accessible to the fullest extent but implicitly P5 shows that her clients come to a new place where everything might be foreign to them:

The majority of these people whom we meet actually have a pretty rough background and have had a long journey here. A lot have happened and they are confronted with a world which they may not be used to; a culture that they are not used to. And yes: nature, milieu, language, food, rules – everything. And it is important that you see the person and that they get attention. (P5)

Things are different here and so their experiences must in some sense be different to her. P5 attends to this. P5 recognizes and acknowledge the other’s experience as

different and significant for their situation. At the same time it “is important that you see the person” (P5). Here P5 express the commonness of her client, they are persons just as she is.

Different levels of understanding cannot be explicated from P5’s interview. How a shared experience with the client might change the understanding of the client is not brought up at all. Understanding is nonetheless present, along with a differentiation between to understand and not to understand. P5’s shared experience of empathy from work (c) was about a meeting with an asylum applicant. At the time she had a map of the Middle East on her office wall which antagonized her client. He asked her to take it down and she did immediately, understanding that he did not want to be reminded of his past life: “Because it was very hard for him to be reminded of his past life.” (P5). When P5 explains how she sometimes uses touch to convey empathy to her clients she senses in the moment if it is appropriate to do so, hence understanding the other and the situation. In another example P5 explains how she let a client sit on the floor because of his trauma:

[...] I have had applicants here too that has not been able to for example – and who have said that they feel very down – and I have said “It is okay. You can sit on the floor or lean on the desk but we have to go through with this”, “Yes, it is no problem” the applicant have answered and the applicant have been seated on the floor and we have done what we had to do [...] There it has also been a mutual respect where I have understood that the person have had such a horrible trauma behind him/her, which others maybe have found odd: “Of course a person can sit on a chair” but if we would be able to do what we was aiming to do: take in background, travel route to Sweden; name and address to relatives; and so on-. And he got to sit on the floor and hold his own head and talk to me and it worked out just fine.

P5 understands the needs of her client and allows the client to sit down wherever he or she wants. She respects the painful situation the traumatized person is in and she feels that the client respects her need to carry on with the questions. P5 realizes that others might find this strange, that they cannot understand how one cannot sit down on a chair and have to sit on the floor. P5 differentiates between understanding and not understanding.

### 5.4.1 Summary

If we summarize we can see that having a shared experience with the other is seen by some participants (P1, P2) as a higher form of understanding. P3 and P4 does express that there are limits to what they can understand due to the lack of a shared experience. P3 is unsure if she could understand the other better if she shared experience with the other. P4 on the other hand expresses implicitly that there is a barrier between every person, this by referring to expressed empathy between clients and that they cannot either understand each other fully in disregard of their similar backgrounds. P5 does not bring up shared experience at all. In all cases, though, it is clear that the participants understand their clients directly, at least in a minimum sense. This is something that the participants do not acknowledge as empathy.

Sharing experiences was something which the majority of the participant brought up and some put considerably weight on. However, the presence or absence of explicitly shared experiences cannot be regarded as a constituent to the essential structure of the phenomenon. What can be generalized in the above vignettes is that there is always is *recognition* of the client's experience. Some understanding of the other can be connected to the act of wanting to understand, which then secondly in individually varied ways can be regarded as different or similar to one's own experiences and that the similarity of an experience is something that might affect understanding. Some participants voiced this as showing respect towards the other but this could not be universally disclosed.

In relation to recognition of the other as possessing different experiences, all the participants express – explicitly and/or implicitly – that they share a commonness with their clients. Though that their experiences are unique does not mean that they are foreign entities. Tendencies to see the other as similar to oneself out of respect for the other's equal human worth could in some cases be discerned but not in every case.

## 6. Discussion

In this last section the findings are discussed in context with the reviewed research. Lastly, practical implications of the findings are discussed along with proposals on further research.

### 6.1 The findings in relation to reviewed research and research questions

The second research question is answered first: What does the concept of empathy mean for the participants in their work? All of the participants stressed the importance of professional empathy. This corresponds well with the reviewed research (e.g. Gair 2009; 2013; Gerdes et al 2011; Segal et al 2012; James & Killick 2012). Since empathy, according to the phenomenological conceptualization, is fundamental to the ability of understanding others it is not strange that empathy is regarded to be imperative for the participants (c.f. Zahavi 2010). Even a participant explicitly negligible to the impact of empathy would show that basic understanding is present implicitly in experiences of intersubjectivity. The argument that the participants stress the importance of empathy univocally simply because they have a shared interest in the phenomenon (demonstrated by their will to participate in the study) is, hence, not a valid critique.

The importance of empathy does not, however, make it easy to incorporate professionally. All of the participants problematized their work role and private life, stating that listening to their client's hardships would at times affect them negatively. This can be compared with the research of Rousseau and Foxen (2010), Westaby (2010), Hall (2010) and Gerdes et al (2011) who all view empathy as a form of affective sharing. Rousseau and Foxen (2010 p. 73-74) and Westaby (2010) emphasize that listening to other's difficult experiences may inflict negatively on the listener through the process of trauma transmission and emotional labor, respectively. On the contrary, Gair (2009, p. 59) finds that theories, wherein empathy is regarded to be an emotional process, have low support in social work student's conceptualizations of the phenomenon. The students do not recognize empathy to

be a state of feeling what the other is feeling. This study reaches a similar conclusion. Support for emotional fatigue as part of the study participant's work can indeed be found in the data. However, it cannot be held as a universal element to empathy. Some participants in the study (P1, P3, P5) saw both negative and positive aspects of empathy in relation to practicing their work while some participants (P2, P4) did not find a conflict between the two at all. This is in line with Zahavi's (2010, p. 291) distinction, that the emotional response is a response of what has first been understood. They are not the same even if they at times can interrelate.

The third research question is: Are there any given ambiguities in the participants' understanding of the meaning of empathy that manifest themselves in situations where interpersonal understanding is present? What is most surprising in the findings is the almost total absence of empathy conceptualized as perspective taking (c.f. Gair 2009, p. 58; Gerdes et al 2011; p. 124; Rogers 1959; 1980/1995; Segal et al 2012). Ambiguities were expected to be found between the participant's explicit expressions of empathy (e.g. explaining empathy to be perspective taking) and implicit expressions of direct understanding. The latter would support the phenomenological concept. The definition of empathy as perspective taking, regarded to be the conventional approach in the reviewed research, was not voiced more than in one instance and in passing (P5).

However, other ambiguities were found. The participants displayed an uncertainty towards how to define and delimit empathy. Regardless if empathy was depicted as hard to describe or not, contradictory meanings in relation to the phenomenon were present across the data. P1 found it difficult to separate empathy from sympathy. P2 was ambiguous to the influence of emotions in the work. P3 had trouble comprehending empathy in relation to understanding. P4 mixed empathy with other actions carried out at work, having trouble deciding what empathy is and what it is not, where it begins and where it ends. Lastly, P5 was ambiguous to how empathy was affected by her working conditions. The act of showing compassion towards others, which some participants associated with empathy (P1, P4, P5), rather corresponds with sympathy, according to research (Gerdes 2011; Zahavi 2011, p. 224; id. 2011b, p. 543). One should be careful to hold these ambiguities against the participants. Maintaining total consistency in an hour long interview where such an abstract topic is discussed cannot be expected. The presence of ambiguities in regard



to the phenomenon clearly shows the complexity of the notion of empathy – and the need to investigate and explicate it.

Lastly the first research question is answered: In what ways does empathy make its appearance in terms of the participant's experience when encountering and working with their clients? Univocally all of the participants stress, both explicitly and implicitly, that listening and being present to the other, either deliberately or spontaneously is how empathy carried out. This conforms to Zahavi's (2010; p. 291; Englander 2014) empathy theory. All of the participants does in several instances show in their experiences that they are implicitly directed to the meaning expressions of others. Correspondingly, the participants express explicitly that this is exactly what they are aiming for when being empathic: to listen and to be present.

When it comes to levels of empathy, many of the participants (P1, P2, P3, P4) voice the need for the presence of shared experiences with the other in order to gain a more profound understanding. Likewise, Gair (2013, p. 144) finds support for the level of empathy to be dependent on the presence of shared experiences. This explicit meaning found in some of the participant's narratives cannot on its own be regarded to be essential to empathy. Although, a recognition of the other's experiences as unique and somewhat unavailable for the empathizer, was present in all cases. There is a strong caution among the participants to claim that they can understand their clients in total – or at all (P3). Implicitly, however, basic understanding is present in all of the narratives. It is in-line with Zahavi's (2010) theory. The participants may disregard it to be full empathy (P1, P2), or something not connected with empathy at all (P3, P4, P5) but their explicit support is not needed. It *shows* in the experiences and it corresponds in minimal sense with the participant's explanations of what they do when they want to convey empathy to their clients. The participant's experiences of empathic understanding as limited is also supported by phenomenological theory (Zahavi 2007, p. 192; see *pairing* in Zahavi 2011, p. 235). The other is not oneself (id., p. 198; c.f. 'mental flexibility' Gerdes et al 2011, p. 116 ref. Decety & Moriguchi 2007, p. 4/21); but understood *as* other (Zahavi 2007, p. 198; Rosan 2012, p. 127).

Though the other is recognized as unique and our access to other's experiences as limited, all of the participants in the study voiced that there were fundamental similarities between themselves and their clients. These implicit meanings support the idea of other's experiences as available, and not hidden from us (Zahavi 2010, p. 286;

Davidson 2003, p. 113; Scheler 1954). The conclusion that can be drawn is that sharing experiences with others may improve our ability to empathize but it is not necessary for empathy to emerge. If the uniqueness of other is seen as the roof of empathy, the recognition of the other is the floor. The ever present commonness between subjects supports the idea of basic understanding and the phenomenological concept of empathy.

Very little is suggesting, from a qualitative standpoint, that simulation is necessary or foundational for expressing empathy (c.f. Gerdes et al 2011; Segal et al 2012). One could of course argue if simulation is there invisibly, not discernable through qualitative inquiry. Support for the phenomenological empathy concept when turning to neuro-cognitive findings has been discussed at length elsewhere (see Gallagher & Zahavi 2012, pp. 197-201). The question here however is if the simulation approach can be the leading empathy concept in social work, as suggested by Gerdes et al (id., p. 126). Clearly it cannot. But can the findings in this study discredit neurological evidence? No. Rather, the question is why empathy has to be conceptualized through a quantitative explanatory approach to then be guiding in qualitative interaction with others.

Before ending this section the notion of cultural understanding will be addressed. Segal et al (2012, pp. 541, 546) mean that social empathy, grounded in perspective taking, can provide in depth understanding of the context of certain ethnic minority groups. Some of the participants (P3, P4) proposes that knowledge of their client's background helps them understand them better. This could not however be regarded as a constituent to the essential structure of the phenomenon. One can easily get stuck in the idea that pre-acquired knowledge is the best way to understand someone else on a deeper level. Even though knowing the history of a certain ethnic group of course may provide some contextual understanding as such, it may not be in unison with the other's personal lived experience as a member of that group. Knowledge can be generalized by approaching from another direction, following the experience of the other and bypass one's own understanding of the intentional object and the meanings the other is expressing (c.f. Englander 2014). By learning from the individual experiences of forced migrants we can come to understand forced migrants as a group, instead of acquiring knowledge elsewhere and try to make it fit the individual. The ultimate question is if we need to explain others as much as we need to understand them.

## 6.2 Practical implications

The necessity to explicate the phenomenon of empathy is grounded in the need for the social worker to apprehend such a pervasive element to the work. Westaby (2010, p. 170) propose that professionals should be “[...] engaging in deep acting or genuine emotional responses to produce authentic emotional displays of empathy and sympathy.” and balance this against the framework of what is expected professionally. Likewise, Rousseau and Foxen (2010, p. 88-89) propose openness for the influence of emotions. One can only conclude. In addition James and Killick (2012, p. 454) argue that viewing the use of empathy as inefficient may counteract the strive for efficiency. The probability of increased sick leave and other negative consequences for organizations due to emotional erosion of the professionals cannot be overlooked. Even if empathy in this study is not found to be emotionally constituted it must all the while be put at the forefront of practice, simply because empathy, as a fundamental element in human interaction, cannot be avoided.

How does one then approach empathy? Gerdes et al (2011; pp. 112, 123-124) provide tools to how empathy can be taught to social work students with focus on mental flexibility, regulation of emotions and perspective taking. It cannot be denied with the support of the findings in this study that these mental acts cannot yield positive results in the work with clients. They may also be part of practicing empathy. However, the results of the study truly challenge these mental acts to be constituting the phenomenon. Englander’s (2014) model of empathy training corresponds with the findings of this study. Making the empathizer focus on the other’s meaning expression will raise awareness to what the social workers already seem to be doing: being present to the other. The use of abstraction may distance us to what we want to be present to (id., p. 9). “If I project the results of my own simulation on to the other, I understand only myself in that other situation, but I don’t necessarily understand the other” (Gallagher & Zahavi 2012, p. 197). By theorizing or simulating the other we may miss out on being present to what is expressed and what is unfolding in front of us. The participants of this study already know how to be empathic but they have trouble explicating the phenomenon and know when they venture in and out of the empathic attitude. Empathy training can provide social workers with the reflection needed in order to become more precise and comprehensive in the professional use of empathy, also helping them to discern

when they are being empathic and when they are not and, hence, provide them with a choice.

Empathy is naturally not enough. We also have to *act* upon what we have come to understand. Nevertheless, when taking life changing decisions and carrying out invasive interventions the preceding understanding must be given considerable space. Empathy can, if used properly, lead us to act in-line with the others experiences or at least make us aware of them when we choose not to act accordingly.

### 6.3 Suggestions for further research

Explicating the phenomenon of empathy among professionals within other areas of social work may yield wider support for the claims made in this study. Moreover, to supplement further inquiries with client experiences of empathy would make for interesting comparisons between cases, investigating corroboration between professional versus client perspectives.

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