Understanding nature of empathy through the lens of service encounter: a phenomenological study on FLE’s

Michael Sony*
Department of Mechanical Engineering,
Namibia University of Science and Technology,
Windhoek, Namibia
Email: emaiofsny@gmail.com
*Corresponding author

Nandakumar Mekoth
Faculty of Management Studies,
Goa University,
Goa, India
Email: nmeekoth@unigoa.ac.in

K.K. Therisa
Dhempe College of Arts and Science,
Miramar, Panaji, Goa, India
Email: therisak@rediffmail.com

Abstract: Research suggests that every conceptual model of service organisations in the past 20 years has recognised that front line employees (FLEs) significantly influence the customer experience. In service front line employee and customer interaction, little is understood about the nature of empathy as a cognitive, an affective, or a multidimensional phenomenon. The purpose of this paper is to investigate the multidimensional nature of empathy. This phenomenological study focuses on how the theoretical discussion of the cognitive-affective nature of empathy finds expression in a service encounter. Conclusions in this study point to the ending that empathy has different meanings for different service frontline employees, when they are empathising with another customer. In probing the way service frontline employees experience empathy, it seems that both cognitive and affective aspects of this experience play a significant role and may appear either collectively or separately. The study provides some initial evidence on the conceptualisation of empathy and present findings add to the literature by focusing on the intrapersonal world of FLE’s and examining how their empathetic behaviour relates to the customer.

Keywords: service encounter; emotional empathy; cognitive empathy; service front line employees; phenomenological research.


Copyright © 2018 Inderscience Enterprises Ltd.
Biographical notes: Michael Sony is currently a Lecturer at Namibia University of Science and Technology. He has obtained his PhD from Goa University. He holds a Master of Engineering in Industrial Engineering from Goa University in the year 2008. He passed Bachelors degree in Engineering in the year 2004. He is a Chartered Engineer and Government of India certified Energy Manager and Energy Auditor from Bureau of Energy Efficiency, India. His research interest includes Service customisation, employee adaptability, Markov model, reliability engineering and discrete system simulation.

Nandakumar Mekoth is currently a Professor and Dean at the Faculty of Management Studies at Goa University, India. He holds a Doctorate at the University of Calicut, India and completed Faulty Development Program of Indian Institute of Management Ahmedabad. He has 25 years of post graduate teaching experience and research experience at Goa University. His teaching area is marketing with research interest in services marketing and consumer behaviour. He published nationally and internationally in reputed, scholarly journals and presented papers in conferences organised by premier institutes like IIMs and international universities in Italy and Switzerland.

K.K. Therisa is currently an Assistant Professor in Dhempe College of Arts and Science, Goa, India affiliated to Goa University. She holds a PhD in Neuropsychology from Goa University. Her research interest includes neurophysiology, ergonomics, and educational research, etc.

1 Introduction

Service frontline employees because of their direct customer interaction are an essential link for the implementation of the marketing concept (Sony and Mekoth, 2012, 2014). Almost every conceptual model of service organisations in the past 20 years has recognised that front line employees (FLEs) significantly influence the customer experience (Ashley and Noble, 2014; Foster and Kokko, 2009). Empathy is one of the five dimensions along with customer evaluates service quality (Parasuraman et al., 1988). Empathy was defined as caring, individualised attention the firm provides to its customers. For the customer the FLE is the firm (Gwinner et al., 2005; Sony and Mekoth, 2012). Hence in a broad sense, empathy in a service encounter is a phenomenon that connects the FLE and the customer to each other. Consequently in a service encounter empathy may be either as an emotional reaction to or a cognitive understanding of customers needs (Lock, 2014). The emotional component of empathy plays a vital role in helping behaviour. It includes facets such as empathic concern (Wieseke et al., 2012) and emotional contagion (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2015; Zahn-Waxler and Radke-Yarrow, 1990) However the cognitive component of empathy is defined as the ability to understand another person’s thoughts and feelings and is also referred to as ‘perspective taking’ (Hoffman, 1984; Topcu and Erdur-Baker, 2012). The marketing literature also highlights the potential importance of empathy for successful employee-customer interactions (Aggarwal et al., 2005; Wieseke et al., 2012). Frontline employees’ empathic ability has been examined empirically by Wieseke et al. (2012); however this study cannot be generalised as the study in conducted in one sector. Besides the study viewed empathy as a cognitive or an affective one. Such water tight compartmentalisation of empathy is criticised by Jolliffe and Farrington (2006). They further claimed that
empathy is a complex multidimensional phenomenon. The multidimensional integrative approach has become the leading one in recent research, but within it the controversy continues (Critchley et al., 2013). As the research spectrum in empathy is ever expanding, however Shahvali et al. (2016) suggest that little attention has been paid to actually measuring levels of empathy within employees. Burch et al. (2016) expounds that the field of empathy research, has been limited by inconsistent definitions and a lack of a model that outlines how empathy is used in organisations. Humphrey (2013) expounds that empathy is an important tool at the hands of organisations. Dal Santo et al. (2014) suggest the importance of organisational policies on empathy of employees. Asiegbu (2016) illuminates an important point, that an employee’s to have an enhanced understanding of new social environments, and assists them quickly learn and adjust to new settings. As such a qualitative study on empathy is warranted to make clear the bemoaning criterion aspect of empathy. Besides there is a strong impact on culture on empathy (Chung and Bernak, 2002) and hence frontline employees empathic abilities should be examined in other cultures to further gain the understanding of empathy in other cultures. The goal of phenomenology is to understand the hidden meanings of experience to clarify the essence of experience as well as the ways through which an individual makes sense of it (Berdychevsky and Gibson, 2015; Beyer, 2011). As such phenomenological study is conducted to understand the empathetic experience of FLE’s in a service encounter as by adopting a phenomenological attitude, a researcher focuses on essential textures and structures that allow objects (that are naively taken for granted under a natural attitude) to appear in our consciousness (Beyer, 2011).

2 Background theory

Several authors propose that it should be related to their knowledge about customer needs (Clark et al., 2012; Foster and Kokko, 2009). Pettijohn et al. (2011) even argue that the process of understanding the client’s needs is similar to the concept of accurate empathic understanding. Empathy has been conceived of as a mode of perceiving (Lichtenberg, 1981), a mode of knowing, a mode of feeling, a mode of being, and a mode of relating (Kerem et al., 2001). It has also been referred to as a trait, an experience, a state, and an interpersonal process (Kerem et al., 2001). Empathy is also conceptualised as human trait, empathy as a professional state, empathy as a communication process, empathy as caring, and empathy as a special relationship (Kunyk and Olson, 2001). Parasuraman et al. (1988) defined it as the provision of caring, individualised attention to customers.

Stueber (2013) suggest that the concept of empathy plays an important role in the psychological mechanisms responsible for our ability to know other minds and our ability to be social creatures that are emotionally attuned to the feelings of others. Decety and Cowell (2014) suggests that Morality and empathy are fundamental components of human nature across cultures. They further suggest that the wealth of empirical findings from developmental, behavioural, and social neuroscience demonstrates a complex relation between morality and empathy. Wondra and Ellsworth (2015) suggest emotion theories say little about feeling emotions for others and empathy theories say little about how feeling emotions for others. The empathy researches have expanded at neuro scientific level. Eres et al. (2015) have expounded that Individual differences in local gray matter density are associated with differences in affective and cognitive empathy. Thus a neuro scientific validity for this concept is emphasised. Mikkonen et al. (2015)
suggest that how experiencing empathy from important members for example their teachers influences students, their learning and professional development. An exploration for exploring the potential impact for selection of employees was done (Su et al., 2015). Patyal and Koolakuntla (2016) proposed a conceptual framework to investigate the impact of organisational culture on quality practices and performance, thus suggesting an integrated phenomenon for service quality. Jha and Nanda (2013) suggest the importance of soft practises on customers. Such soft practises could be empathy manifested in various forms. Prakash et sl. (2011) suggest the importance of each service quality elements which includes empathy also.

The caring, individualised attention to customers could stem from emotional, cognitive or multidimensional integrative perception of empathy by the FLE’s (Touroni and Coyle, 2002). One of the major controversies in the literature, persisting over the years, concerns the nature of empathy. Whether it is a cognitive phenomenon? (taking the perspective of another, or inferring her/his inner experience) or an affective/emotional one (sharing another’s inner experience, or vicarious feeling)? (Smith, 2006; Wieseke et al., 2012). From the cognitive perspective, many studies defined it as a process of perspective taking or of inferring another person’s/customers thoughts and feelings from various cues (Constantine, 2000; Wai and Tiliopoulos, 2012). In this conceptualisation any affect accompanying those processes was considered an epiphenomenon. From the affective/emotional side, empathy is defined as affective reaction of one person to the experience of another (Mehrabian et al., 1988; Wieseke et al., 2012). The scales were developed to assess empathy along both these two kinds of definitions and were different. Duan and Hill (1996) stated that cognitive empathy and affective empathy are two different and independent phenomena. Each of them has separate influence on different interpersonal behaviours. While there can be reciprocal influences between them. They terms ‘intellectual empathy’ and ‘empathic emotions’, are used to differentiate between the emotional and cognitive empathy. Researchers like Strayer (1987), Jolliffe and Farrington (2006) and others disagreed the water tight compartmentalisation of cognitive and affective aspects of empathy. They further claimed that empathy is a complex multidimensional phenomenon. The multidimensional integrative approach has become the leading one in recent research, but within it the controversy continues (Critchley et al., 2013). A distinction is possible between empathy primarily as a cognitive phenomenon, with the emotional aspect serving it (Ickes, 1997) and cognitive understanding as serving the affective experience (Hoffman, 1984). In other words, current approaches differ as to which is the process and which is the outcome, when the outcome defines the ‘true’ nature of empathy.

3 Research question and objectives

There have been the academic debates on empathy. The debate prevailed around empathy as being:

1. emotional (Macaskill et al., 2002; Wai and Tiliopoulos, 2012)
2. cognitive (Smith, 2006; Wai and Tiliopoulos, 2012)
multidimensional integrative approach (Hein and Singer, 2010; Jolliffe and Farrington, 2006).

Therefore, the primary purpose on this study was to look into and answer an important question, how service FLE experiences empathy in their service encounter? The importance of empathy in service encounter is widely researched and it is transpired that it is an important tool for the marketer. However what is not understood is the nature of empathy in a service encounter. In order to unearth the nature of empathy, we envisaged to approach the service FLEs to understand the lived in experience. With this objectives, we thought of listening to the participant’s own way of giving meaning to their experiences and constructing a model to explain the phenomenon. Therefore, while doing study on the service frontline employee, we looked at following questions:

a What concepts do service frontline employee use when describing their experiences of empathising with customer and being empathised with?

b Do they use the same concepts as the literature does?

c Do service frontline employees describe experiences of empathy that include exclusively emotional or exclusively cognitive or multidimensional components?

d When they describe both, how do the three aspects coexist in the service experience?

e What do the emotional, cognitive and multi-dimensional aspects of their experiences consist of?

These questions were used as all-purpose guiding principle only, because we wanted to explore the experience of empathy in a phenomenological way in order to learn about the variety, complexity, and individual differences concerning the real-life experience of this multifaceted concept.

4 Methods

The method used to conduct the study is briefly described in this section. We begin with the design, participants and settings, subsequently setting are further explained. At last the data collection and data analysis methodology is explained.

4.1 Design, participants and setting

A methodology based on phenomenology was used to conduct this study, combining features of descriptive (Husserlian) and interpretive phenomenology (Gadamerian).

This methodology has been used in several studies. Phenomenological methodology was chosen to conduct this study, because it allows a deeper understanding of peoples lived experience as well as an investigation of the meaning people attribute to an experience. In fact, according to the phenomenological approach that guided this study. Empirical phenomenological research involves a revisit to experience in order to get hold of comprehensive descriptions that offer the base for an analysis that portrays the essences of the experience (Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenological investigations try to unveil and explicate the meaning making of the participants. Evidence, from a phenomenological perspective, is constituted by first person accounts of lived experience.
An empirical-phenomenological inquiry begins by collecting protocols descriptive of the participants’ experience (that is, subjectively interpreted by the participant) and then systematically analyses these descriptions to arrive at the structure, essences, or central themes of the experience. The aim is to determine what an experience means for the persons who have had the experience and, from this, an illustration of meaning creation and its structure is derived (Kerem et al., 2001).

4.2 Setting

To obtain a variety of responses, in-depth interviews were conducted with 36 easily accessible FLEs working in a range of retail organisations in Goa, India, in transactional and relational selling and non-selling roles. Job examples included front line customer executives from bank and power sector, clothing store sales associate, librarian, and bank loan officer. A sample size of 36 was considered sufficient (Sandberg, 2000). In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted in one meeting; in the participant’s offices and were conducted in places that were convenient for participants. The mean age of the employees was 32.5 years. Twenty-one females and rest were males. They were employees working as front line customer executives from bank and power sector, clothing store sales associate, librarian, and bank loan officer.

4.3 Data collection

All interviews were conducted in an empathic mode with the aim of understanding participants’ meanings, both cognitively and affectively (Josselson, 2007; Josselson and Lieblich, 1995). The interviews were recorded. The interviewing procedure was based on (Josselson, 2007; Josselson and Lieblich, 1995) relational mapping technique, which provides a grid for inviting narratives of relationships. Kerem et al. (2001) had also used similar methodology for their research. First, the participants were asked to draw a ‘relational space’, mapping with circles around the most important customers encountered in last one year. The definition of most important customer is whom FLE considered as most important irrespective of the value the customer generated to the company. A word of caution to exercise is the person should not be related to FLE and at least two front line interactions that too on different days. They were asked to begin with how their relational space would have looked to them at first meeting and in subsequent meetings. These drawings formed the basis for an in-depth interview about how each customer on each diagram had been important to the service frontline employee being interviewed. Finally, at the end of the interview, the participants were asked specific questions designed to closely examine the experience of empathy in two directions: the experience of being empathised with and the experience of empathising with another. The format of the specific questions was as follows:

a. Choose one customer or more, on the last map [representing the present], whom you feel really you empathetically understood his/her need knowledge.

Sub-questions: what do you empathetically understand, how does you empathetically understand, how do you know or feel that you empathetically understands the customer?
Choose the customer on the last map whom you feel or think understood that you empathetically understood his/her needs. For each one, try to give an example of an occasion that involved both of you, in which you felt that customer empathetically understood (What do you think he/she feel, what do you think he/she think, or what do you think going on with him/her?)

We decided on using the word ‘understand’ and also its equivalent in Konkani the Indian local language where the research was conducted, because it is an experience-near word, which take in empathy’s complex meanings.

4.4 Data analysis

Investigation within a phenomenological framework involves reflecting on the meanings distilled from the concrete language of the participants, attempting to understand them, and then convert them into the language of management science. Thus, we separated out from the interviews each reference to feeling understood or understanding customer and systematically analysed the language of the participant for its reference to cognitive or affective components of understanding. We also remained alert to other aspects of the empathic experience that did not fit well into existing definitions, because one of the advantages of the phenomenological method is that it lessens the risk of premature selection of categories. All the interviews were analysed by the authors themselves, the analysis strategy included.

1 Description of the service frontline employee: a brief description about him/her and the main subjects that appeared in the interview.

2 A description of the impulsive expressions of empathising with customers or feeling empathised with throughout the whole interview. Here we included only descriptions of relationships that referred specifically to a sense of being understood by or understanding the customers.

3 A description of the experience of understanding the customers, which came up from the first question.

4 A description of the experience of being understood as recorded from the answer to the second supplemental question.

5 Subsequently, the experiences of empathy that occurred both spontaneously and in response to the specific questions were analysed again, with respect to the cognitive-affective elements they included. The general purpose was to see how the descriptions of the participants referred to cognitive and affective aspects of their own experiences. We looked for expressions of emotions or cognitive processes, and analysed those expressions according to the elements composing them (shared emotions, perspective taking, or other elements), their ability to exist separately, or to coexist simultaneously, and so forth.

In the discussions on results, we offer the actual words of the participants in order to make crystal clear our processes of movement from the data of experience to interpretation. Hence, we demonstrate the credibility of our findings and the defensible
reasoning (Lincoln and Guba, 2000) of our interpretations. The participant’s original first names are used as no participant has expressed any resentment over identity disclosure.

5 Findings

All the service frontline employees mentioned in a definite way to cognitive elements in describing their empathy experiences, and most of them mentioned affective elements. The reasonable set up for analysis would be by presenting examples of the two kinds of references. Then a revelation on how some service frontline employees integrated both elements of empathy in their stories, while others made a clear distinction between cognitive and affective understanding. Finally, we will present the different meanings of the cognitive and the affective components that featured in the interviews. We will present all these in the participants’ own words, accompanied by our interpretations of them.

5.1 Cognitive empathy

Many of the service frontline employees referred to the concept of perspective taking or role taking in their descriptions. Some did it in a very clear and direct way, using expressions such as seeing through customers’ eyes or from customer point of view but most of them described the way the customer sees things without explicitly using the term perspective taking or any similar one. In many cases, we found that participants brought examples of situations in which they understood customers in a cognitive, rational way, without any clear emotional sharing or identification.

Prachi explained how she understands her customer’s motives and needs: “I believe that my customer was trying very hard on one side, to be very friendly. May be such friendly attitude was to make me think of him as such, but on the other side, in order to satisfy his needs of the service he have to make things obvious”.

This sounds like a very deep insight concerning her customer’s inner experience, thoughts, and motives, in which Prachi was able to put herself in their place and understand them in a cognitive way, which did not seem to include emotional acceptance of their behaviour or any shared emotions. Throughout the interview, Prachi described spontaneously the perspective of her customers, even those who hurt her, like a customer who was complaining of a trivial service failure: “handling him, my God was very difficult, but we have to understand him, he demanded too much from me, and rightfully so, we just couldn’t keep up with him”.

Maria described the understanding that she experiences from the customers who are close to her as their ability to take her perspective: “because they are close to me and know me well, they can see through my eyes”. She emphasised the role of knowledge, which alludes to a cognitive element more than an affective one. Asmita too was trying very hard to understand her customer, who had hurt her. She invested much effort in trying to see things from her customer’s perspective in order to rid her from the anger and also this customer was very important for my company. But her empathy did not include emotional understanding and she remained distant:
“I don’t have a good relationship with this customer, we don’t quarrel but it is a very basic official relationship … I don’t blame her, I believe it is due to her being from a affluent family and she is always bossing … I am not angry with her, now that I understand where she came from and how important she is for my firm.”

Suzanne chose her customer Jyothi as the customer who understands her best and described how she understands her by knowing her job and her motives: “I think she understands my role in the organization and what can drive me to close or leave a deal in situation. Sometimes she behaves like a true customer just wanting her way in and I like a true employee … But this does not happen usually”. Suzanne refers particularly to her ability to see the situation the same way as she does, and recognises some situations in which she could not take the same perspective as her. Preeti seemed to understand her customer difficulties in an intellectual manner, without any emotional warmth, and with a certain amount of anger: “she is from Germany and came to India about a year back to learn yoga. She is used to customer service behaviour in a developed country. She had a hard time adjusting to the mentality of Indian service employees. So it was difficult for her at every transaction. I remember her shouting at me for no reason”. Preeti was able to understand in a cognitive way how her customer felt, but all through the interview it seemed that she held a grudge and could not emotionally accept her customer’s behaviour. Sita emphasised that the understanding she experiences with her customer has to do with the fact that they know each other well: “I understand him very well and he also knows me. Our kids study in the same school. We are very different but because of his knowledge of the situations, and of me, he knows. I think the decisions either of us would make, would be the sometimes opposite of the other’s, but I can still guess what he would decide and vice versa”. Due to their ability to perceive the world through the other’s eyes, each of them can infer what the other is thinking or feeling even though they think differently.

5.2 Emotional empathy

Some of the same service frontline employees that we have mentioned, as well as others, referred to elements of shared emotions in telling their experiences of understanding. Those elements were normally less clear than the cognitive ones, and sometimes we could only conclude, from the circumstances of the participant’s narrative, that there was an emotional recognition involved. The clearest examples of shared emotions came from the descriptions of the participant’s empathy towards customers and much less as an experience of being empathised with. Sonia was the participant who described an experience of emotional sharing that seemed to exist without a clear cognitive understanding. In general, she focused much on cognitive, intellectual elements when describing the experience of empathy that she feels for customers. But when discussing her own empathy towards her customer, she said: “although I might not understand her personally, I am connected with her. When this customer tells me some loan repayment options are difficult for her I feel bad for her, and when she shared that she is pleased with our internet banking I am happy for her. Though we are from different walks of life, I can understand much of what she is going through because we are close”. Sonia says here that, although she cannot completely understand this customer cognitively, because they are in different life stages, their emotional connection enables her to share this customer emotion. Asmita gave two examples of her understanding of customers. Both
included a clear sharing of emotion, whether the emotion was pleasant or not. When talking about a customer who was shouting at a car driver over some issue, she said: “I really understood her and was sympathizing for her. I felt a need to console her … I felt terrible”. Asmita’s description was of such a profound sharing of emotion that it seems as if she herself were shouting at the driver. The second example she gave was of an experience of identifying with the emotional experience of happiness: “when her customer, whose husband who was a seaman came home. She was all joyous and came to shop with him… I felt so happy for her as if my husband came home … you feel some identification”. Jane also connected her feeling of being understood by her customer to a mutual sharing of emotions: “we understand each other so well that I feel that I feel that in my entire career there hardly been any customer whom I could instantly understand”

Ram referred to the affective component in an indirect way, when describing his empathy towards his customer. He talked about many features that contribute to his understanding, and at the end he said: “I cannot really make clear it. I just feel it. It is beyond words” Ram’s empathy seems to include an emotional experience that is difficult for him to convey through words, due, it seems, to the cognitive nature of language. Arjun also referred to the affective component in an indirect way, He also talked about many features that contribute to his understanding: “I don’t know how to express it … I just feel it. But cannot be described” Arjun’s empathy like Ram’s seems to include an emotional experience that is difficult for him to convey through words, due, it seems, to the cognitive nature of language. Shivshankar chose an elderly customer as the person he can understand the best. He described elderly customer as an eccentric figure, whose feelings of loneliness Shivshankar could share: “with him I can empathize the most, since I understand the kind of loneliness that he must have experienced”.

5.3 Affective and cognitive elements

Service frontline employees referred to both affective and cognitive elements when describing their empathic experiences. In some of the cases, the amalgamation of these elements was more outstanding, and seemed as if both components were meaningfully integrated into the same experience In Jane, we found a description of an experience that could be reflecting a multiphase process. Initially started with an affective reaction and ended with a cognitive understanding. Jane chose her one elderly customer as the person who understands her best, and described this experience: “she understands me when there is a server problem in the bank. She takes all my excuses regarding the problem, take them and put them in the correct extent … put things in order in her mind, but the kind of order that I think I had thought of myself … just didn’t know how to do”. This is like a process that includes a temporary emotional sharing, followed by taking an objective stand in order to help organise and understand the experience. Jane’s customer seemed to contain the troubled feeling, but only in order to help her get out of this feeling and organise her experience in a rational way. The organisation is contrary to the emotional state of Jane, but is experienced as a continuation of her experience: the customer is offering the kind of organisation that Jane herself thought of but could not do on her own. May be the reason for such a customer behaviour could be because of the elderly age of the customer and the degree of relationship Jane has with the customer. Sonia mostly referred to rational understanding in her experiences, but when speaking about her own empathy towards a customer, it seemed that she integrated into it emotional elements as well: “over the last few months, an illiterate customer tells me it is difficult to bank with
us and I realize that it is all a result of his illiteracy … I really understand this because I understand how difficult it will be without knowing to read or write. I feel only by looking at it from the outside. So I really understand how hard it is to release. I can really understand that”. Although Sonia did not mention identification with her customer, it seems that she did experience emotional identification with her customer’s difficulty, while at the same time she analysed the situation. Her experience of understanding her customer is comprised of the two integrated elements. Uday also combined both elements when describing his experience of being understood:

“The customers I chose are customers who can, because of their nearness to me, and the length of our relationship, they can kind of feel me. Things that I think or feel, if I only say something they would immediately relate to it and understand. By knowing the way in which I think, my character, and in the context of my Job, they are involved even if it doesn’t concern them directly. Because they are close to me and know me well, they can see through my eyes.”

In this long and complex statement, Uday described the way that close customers can ‘feel him’ and ‘be involved’, while at the same time understand the way he thinks and take his perspective.

5.4 Differentiation between the affective and cognitive elements

Service frontline employees made a clear distinction between emotional and intellectual understanding. These service frontline employees did not always use the common theoretical concepts for telling the different experiences, but it seemed that the difference was consequential in their experience. When service FLEs differentiated between the cognitive and the affective dimensions, they have a propensity to view the emotional dimension as being more important, and referred to it as the kind of understanding they were looking for and respected more, or as the understanding they experienced only in the most meaningful of relationships.

Dileep, when first asked who the customers that understood him best were, replied: none? He next came up with some names but explained why he started with none: “Because I don’t think any one can understand me … I am doing job and all by myself … There is no trouble to understand me, I clarify myself very clearly. But the one that goes through the process is always me. Me with myself”. On one hand it seems as if at some vital level he feels very forlorn, not understood, without anyone On the other hand, he claims that understanding him is no problem, because he knows how to express himself well. Only by looking at it as referring to two different kinds of empathy can we make sense of his experience. He did seem to feel a certain kind of understanding that includes mainly cognitive aspects, understanding that is a function of intellectual explanation, but he was missing understanding that includes emotional aspects as well, and felt unsatisfied. When Dileep described his understanding of a particular customer, he included an emotional identification: “I felt I could understand this customer. I knew what her need was … It is easy for me to identify with it”. But when he spoke generally about the rest of his relationships he talked about intellectual understanding: “This is a general thing. I really like studying customers … and the more difficult the customers are to study the more interesting it is … I think I analyzed all my customers … so this is also some kind of understanding. Again, cognitively”. Uday, answered straight in response to the question about his empathy towards customers, “there are a few kinds of
understanding. The first kind is like I have with a long standing customer of mine. This is an understanding that because we have overlapping parts "referring to the way he drew their circles on his map", we have an understanding that doesn’t have to be verbal". This first kind of understanding is a type of feeling transferred devoid of words and has something to do with their ability to experience merger in to the same body, or in Jordan’s words: “a momentary overlap of self and other by a relaxation of ego boundaries” (1991, p.29). This kind of merger is usually mentioned in the literature as the affective component of empathy. Uday then mentioned the second type: “the other kind of understanding is like what I have with subhash another customer … because he tells me things, and I know him well enough to see things through his eyes”. In this type of understanding, Uday is talking about a cognitive experience, in which he knows what Subhash is talking about by taking Subhash’s perspective. Uday finished with an emphasis on the distinction he made between the different experiences of understanding: “these are two fundamentally different understandings, as I see it”. Carlos tells about an old lady customer, who suffers from anxiety states:

“she is very lonely. I simply know some of those worries, as she suffers from empty nest as her kids have grown up and migrated to Portugal so I think I understand her. That is, I know it from myself. And there are other things I can understand rationally, and this is something completely different. But I would call both things to understand.”

5.5 Cognitive elements transpired from our research

As we have seen, many service frontline employees referred to the cognitive aspect of their experience as perspective taking, which resembles the way this aspect is typically described in the literature. But a close look at their descriptions and their vocabulary provides us with a more complex and different depiction of the subjective experience of empathy. In a number of cases, we found that the ability to defy one’s viewpoint and to offer him/her other points of view was the core element of the empathic experience from the service frontline employee’s side. Prachi spoke about the way she understood a customer. She gave this example: “when a customer’s father in law told him that he should be using a particular service provider which according to him is offering good service. He came to me just to compare that particular service provider and our company’s telephone calling plans. He was talking about discounts offered on SMS, per second calling plan, etc. I felt emotionally attached to him as he was our very good customer. I felt that he is just wanting to change the service provider just to please his father in law who himself is caught in the web of marketing gimmicks. I asked him a simple question do you get range of that new service provider in your bedroom or study room. He was taken a back and said to confirm it and get back to me. The next day he came and said to me. You are right and from then onwards he was the loyal customer”. In this example, it seems as though Prachi was not just taking customer perspective, and was able to see his need to satisfy his father in law, but challenged his point of view and emotional state, by raising doubts and questions. Customer experienced the confrontation Prachi created with her perspective as empathic. Of course, Prachi had to understand Customer point of view in order to raise the questions about it, but Customer emphasised Prachi ability to face Customer with those questions and to enable Customer to see other perspectives. Asmita too described the understanding that she experienced from her Customer. “A customer who was loyal to our bank complained about misappropriation of
money. At first instance I felt very bad about this; I checked our records and found every transaction accounted for. So I politely told the customer, to recheck the issue. After a week the customer came back and told us his brother had withdrawn the money as he was in urgent need and apologized to us for the inconvenience. The customer really appreciated what I said”. It seems that perspective taking is part of the process that customer experiences as empathic, but the emphasis is on the ability to see different perspectives and convey them to customer. On many occasions, the service FLEs referred to experiences of cognitive understanding based on familiarity or similarity rather than perspective taking. While familiarity and similarity may enhance the ability to take the perspective of the other, the service FLEs described experiences that did not include active role taking as much as a general ability to expect the other’s reactions, and infer inner processes. Sonia, for example, told about her customer’s ability to understand her because of the similarity between them: “she claims that we are similar, so different things that I say or feel, she claims to understand and feel the same way”. The Sonia, therefore, was able to be empathic to her customer by using her own viewpoint and a general stance of identification, but without trying to see the unique perspective of her customer. Anthony made a clear connection between his ability to understand customers, and internal similarities, which apparently enable him to base his inferences about others on the way that he experiences things: “Pedro is exactly my kind. I also understand because he is like me, His and mine choices are somewhat similar”. Nitin regarded his customer understanding of him as due to the length of their relationship and to their similarities: “I don’t know how to explain it. I think it is a issue of time and the fact that we are so similar in so many things”. When he discussed the way he understood this customer, he said: “with him it has more to do with duration and nearness of the association. Because I do not think it is really a matter of knowing”. From the way Nitin describes his experience, it seems that he does not connect in active role taking, in which he judge all he knows about his customer and imagines how he must feel at a certain moment. Instead, he goes through a less conscious and deliberate process, which seems to be, experienced as intuitive knowledge. Although this feeling of knowing is based on prior knowledge, it might have become a part of a subconscious consciousness that exists between them and does not require a compound cognitive process in every empathic interaction.

5.6 Affective elements transpired from our research

Many service FLEs referred to the emotional aspect of their experience as a shared emotion or classification with the affective state of another, which matches the way this aspect is usually talked about in the literature. On the whole, the participants credited more meaning to the emotional facet of empathy. Particularly, we found that some service FLEs made a connection between these experiences and emotional closeness, warmth, and acceptance within the relationships they were telling. Dileep, when asked to describe how he felt or knew that customer, understands him: “when I am with a particular customer I feel that I am understood, I feel emotional hold on the entire service encounter”. Uday referred to the way he experienced understanding from those customers close to him, by stressing emotional closeness: “I think that frankness, acceptance and sincerity are the most important elements in any dealings … I think that customers whom I can share my opinion with and customers with me are the customers that are the flanking, and with whom I have the strongest relations”. Some service frontline
employees described an experience of empathy towards them that purposely excluded sharing the same emotion: people who did not share their pressure, concern, or uncertainty, but kept a distance or put them in place, are the ones who really understood them. Ram told about the empathy he feels from her customers:

“A customer was always complaining about trivial things about services in our bank. His problem was he had much baloney in his head. He was a customer who was very vital to company and frequently in transaction. I knew when he was in a complaining mood there was no need to offer any explanation I just listened to him with respect and just kept quiet.”

Seemingly, Ram rejoinder was not empathic to her customer rage or pressure, for she shuts her mouth. But for customer, this feedback was experienced as empathic precisely because Sharon did not contribute to the distress with customer. Sita gave an example of a state of affairs in which she understood the customer.

“A customer used to unnecessarily complain about the time taken to deposit the cash even though the time was within time standards set by the bank. She understood that this customer had arthritis problem and it was difficult for him to stand. Also another customer of mine is to be always disheartened and don’t know what to do … I always used to calm him down and knew how to present things to customer in a way that calms customer down … I do not understand customer’s pressure, I just helps me deal with it.”

6 Discussions

Looking at the way service frontline employees experience empathy in their employee-customer encounter, we establish that both cognitive and affective processes are key aspects. The academic concepts that are common in the literature also appear in the language used by the service FLEs, who engage in their employee-customer encounter interactions in taking the other’s perspective, sharing his or her feelings, and experiencing those reactions from others as well. As for the query whether the service frontline employees experience empathy in their employee-customer encounter are experienced as two separate and independent phenomena, in correspondence with Duan and Hill (1996) claim, or as aspects that are included into a complex multifaceted phenomenon, as has been claimed by others (Eisenberg and Strayer, 1987; Zaki and Ochsner, 2012), our study put forward that service frontline employees differ in this regard. Some service frontline employees tell apart between these experiences, while for others the affective and cognitive aspects were integrated into the same experience. Occasionally it was hard to know from the way some service FLEs described their experiences which kind of integration they were describing. We found some descriptions where both aspects were tangled and might have been experienced concurrently, (Kerem et al., 2001) theorised. We also establish one clear description of a process that went from one aspect to the other, and incorporated containing the misery of another and then organising the emotional experience in a cognitive-rational way. This description resembles the multiphase process discussed by Jordan (1991). Some service frontline employees described experiences that included only cognitive aspects, with no affective component. Some would argue that this does not constitute an empathic experience (Jordan, 1991), who makes a distinction between empathy and intellectual endeavour to renovate, while others would consider it empathic as long as the understanding is
The underlying principle there were fewer expressions of emotions in describing the experience of being empathised with than in the experience of empathising might be explained by the relative complexity in being aware of the provisional emotional experience of the other, while the feature that is communicated more explicitly and is more recognisable and verifiable – is the rational understanding. However, the affective component seems to have individual significance. Empathy that consist of feelings such as acceptance, sharing and identification is the sort of understanding most desired and meaningful among our service frontline employees. The most common classification given to the affective component in the literature is sharing the emotion of another. Some service FLEs referred to this meaning, but others described a different kind of emotional understanding in which the affective component is part of or associated with an ambiance of responsiveness, warmth, acceptance, closeness, and so forth. This verdict suits the extra broad classification of the affective phase given by Feshbach (1975): emotional responsiveness. It also suits the assertion that (Batson and Shaw, 1991) made about the incorporation of sympathy, compassion, and tenderness in the emotional reaction, which they see as empathy. This is also alike to psychoanalytic metaphor of the affective piece of empathy as the attuned responsive mother, in which case empathy is conceived of as a nurturing atmosphere. Empathy can be wedged in not taking another’s perspective. Many of our respondents experienced empathy when others challenged their point of view and presented other perspectives. This kind of explanation seems to correspond to another type of empathic ‘need’. What is experienced as ‘understanding’ is the other person’s
attunement to a temporarily occupied self-experience in the receiver of empathy. Precise empathy at this time involves telling the individual what he himself or she herself has on his mind but dares not utter or believe, or might be unaware of, until somebody else gives it expression and therefore, validation. This sort of empathic experience is comparable to the psychoanalytic conception of empathy as including a complementary identification ‘contact … with the split off parts’ of the other’s self (Bolognini, 1997). We also create a correlation between feeling understood or understanding others, and aspects of likeness and familiarity. In this kind of understanding, people are by themselves and the similarity between their own circumstances and the one that the other is experiencing. Other service frontline employees described familiarity as a strong base of factual understanding, and the ability to predict emotional and behavioural reactions of the other (Colvin et al., 1997) also found that people understand better those that they know better. The familiarity factor might facilitate the process of perspective taking.

7 Limitation

This research, of course, has special aspects that bound its conclusions. The most obvious one is the difference between the concept of understanding and that of empathy. Because of the uncertainty of the concept of empathy, and its relative distance from everyday language, we chose to use the word understanding. We phrased the questions in a way that was designed to direct the service FLEs to a deep and meaningful understanding and to enable them to express emotions. But however, it might be that the use of this word led the service FLEs to a more cognitive-intellectual orientation, and less to empathic emotions. On the other hand, most service FLEs did refer to emotional aspects. In addition, asking people about their experience of understanding has led some to talk about experiences that have been conceptualised in the literature as sympathy, personal distress, or projection (Eisenberg and Strayer, 1987). This represents the complexity in fitting our phenomenological findings into the current discourse of empathy research, which makes conceptual distinctions that may not be made experientially. This effort represents an effort to bring the theory in line with the phenomenology of the experience of empathy.

References

Understanding nature of empathy through the lens of service encounter


No. 1, pp.12–40.


No. 1, pp.91–112.


Understanding nature of empathy through the lens of service encounter


