

The interactional dynamics of empathy

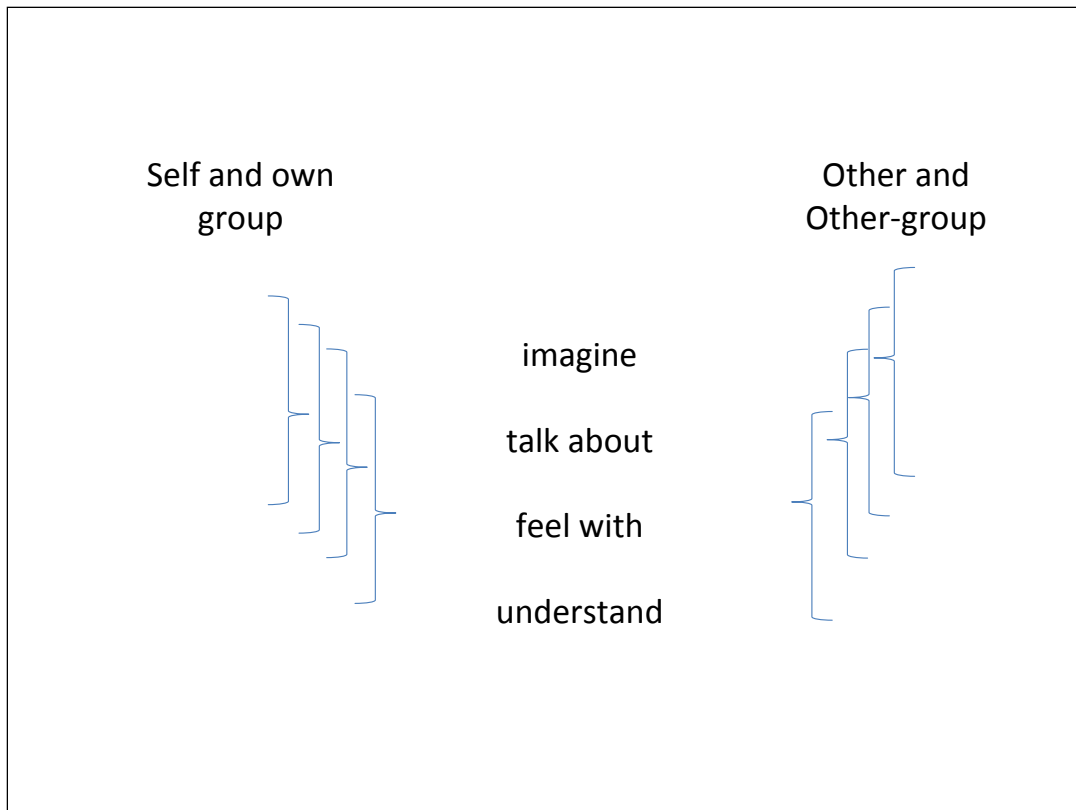
A model

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Living with Uncertainty project

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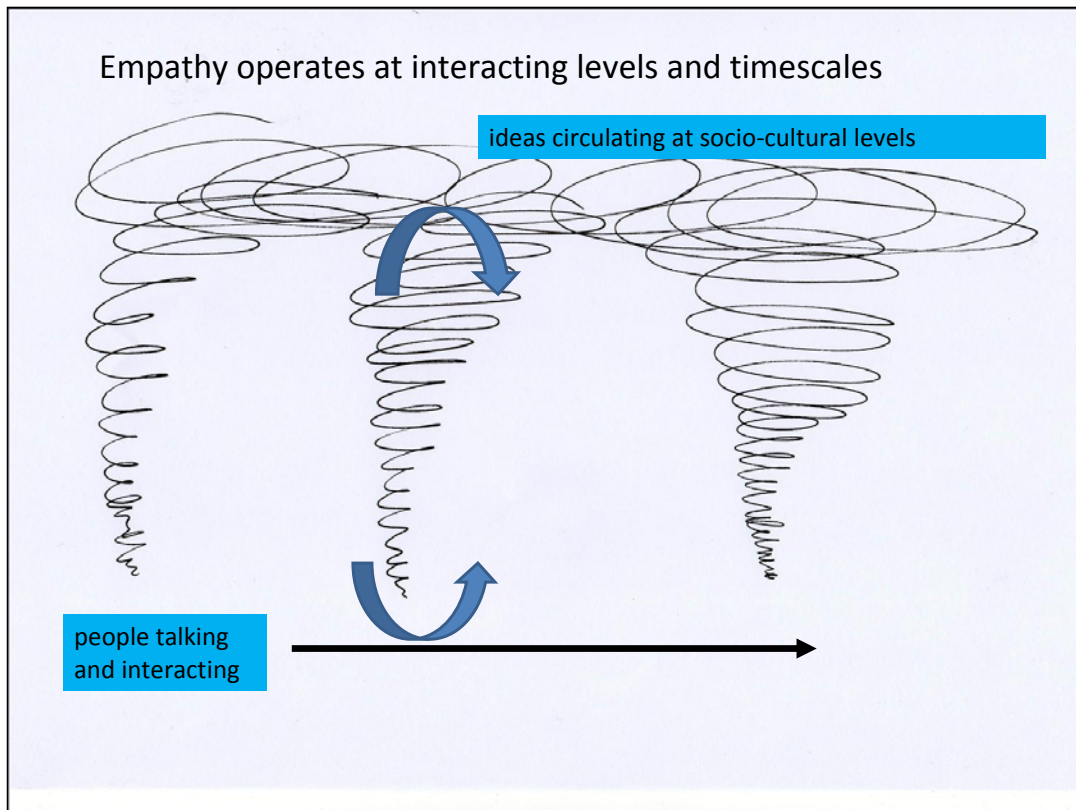
Empathy concerns how the Self understands the Other. At its heart is the act of imagination that tries to understand how it feels to be the Other in their world. The Living with Uncertainty project is building a model of empathy in dialogue and interaction, so at the heart of the model we place Self and Other (on the left and right of this diagram). This diagram also represents the fact that any participant comes to interaction as individual with multiple social group memberships and influences. The gap between Self and Other (developed as ‘alterity’, after Bakhtin (1981, 1986) can be bridged by what people say to each and by emotions and understandings that remain unspoken.

The model presents empathy in terms of complex, dynamic systems. This commitment assumes:

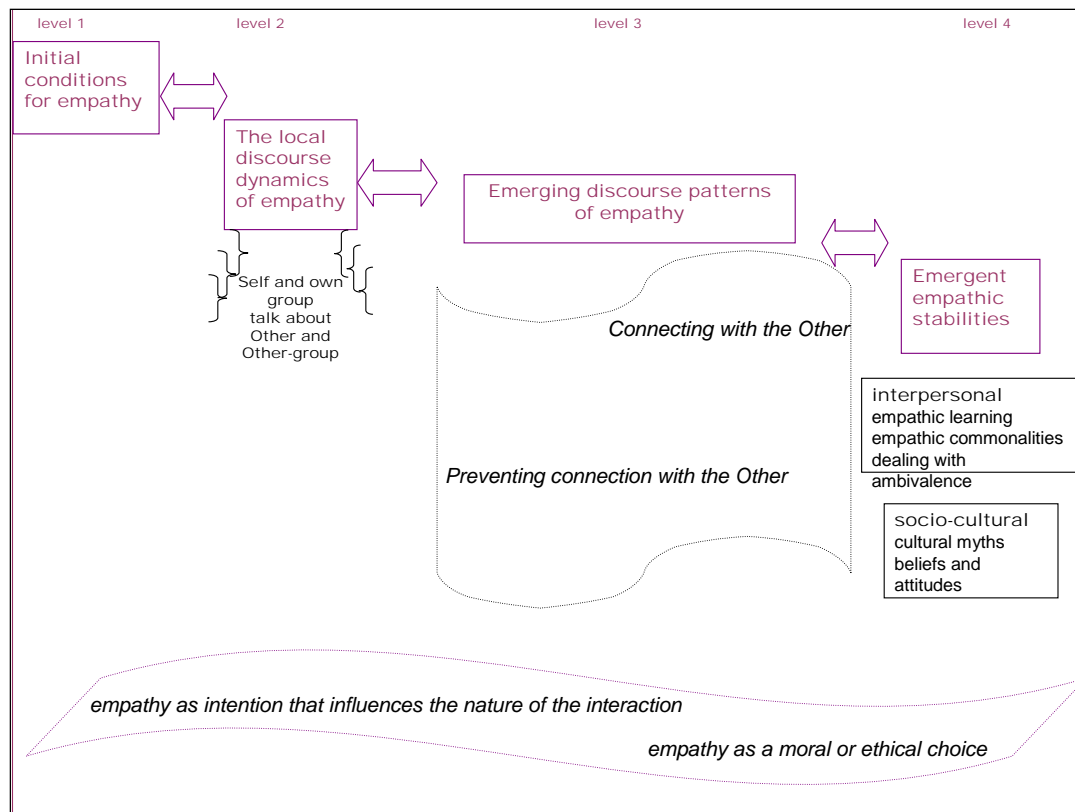
- people, their talk and their actions are multiply connected out into the socio-cultural. This is the complexity.
- everything changes all the time – people, what they say, what they think, what they do, society. This is the dynamics.

In complex systems, non-linear change can produce sudden perturbations that shift the system into a new pattern of behaviour.

Activity can emerge out of interactions on a lower timescale or level.



This slide offers another way to picture the social influencing the interpersonal, and vice versa, It shows two levels or timescales. The 'cloud' along the top represents the socio-cultural: ideas, attitudes, stories that circulate and in which the individual lives their everyday life. The arrow along the bottom represents the timescale of dialogue and interaction. When 2 or more people engage in dialogue at a point on this line, they are constrained by the socio-cultural cloud and also change it through their interaction – this is indicated by the feedback and feed forward loops. The cloud and its funnelling connections into specific interactions is used as the background to the model as we build it up, as a reminder that this feedback and feedforward is always happening.



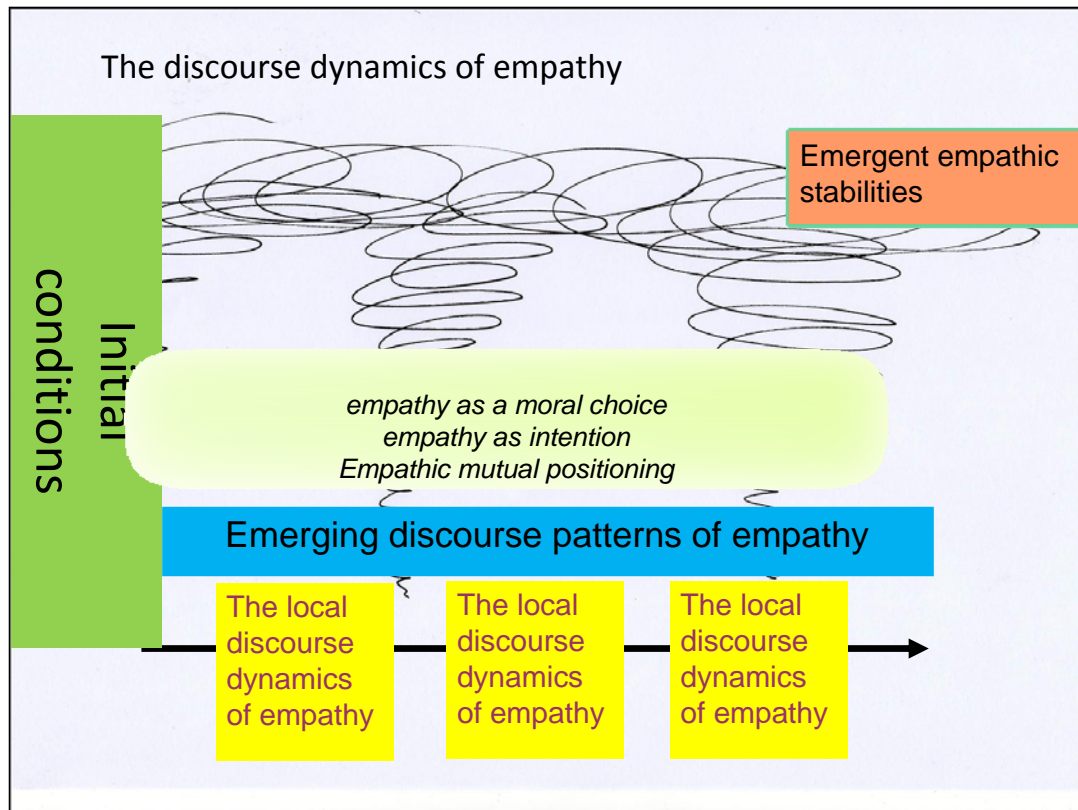
This is the first model of empathy that was developed in Cameron (2011) – see Working paper 2 on the LwU website: <http://www.open.ac.uk/researchprojects/livingwithuncertainty/>

It tips the previous orientation on its side – the socio-cultural cloud is here shown as Level 4, influencing down into (and influenced by) the specific interactions taking place at levels 2 and 3.

The model now has four, rather than two levels. It adds ‘initial conditions’ as Level 1 and splits the level of dialogue and interaction into 2.

Initial conditions are really important in complex dynamic systems because even the smallest factor can exert a major influence on how the system develops. It follows that understanding the initial condition – what factors are influencing participants – is really important. Level 1 of the model describes the initial conditions of the system, an ‘empathy landscape’ set up by previous interactions, by intergroup relations and by socio-political histories. As people engage in dialogue, in level 2 of the model, the system carves out a path across this empathy landscape; each place on the path represents the state of the system at that point in time. As people interact, so empathy shifts and changes, and in the course of the interaction, the relations between them may change; this change is seen as emergence on to the level of the particular interaction, level 3. In the metaphor of the empathy landscape, changed relations are an evolving of the landscape, which presents the system with new options. Level 4 is the longer term, socio-cultural level. Repeated interactions at levels 2 and 3 lead to shifts in empathy, which emerge as stabilisations on level 4 and as fixings of the empathy landscape. In complex systems, such stabilisations demonstrate variability and are always open to further change. The degree of stability of a system and the types of variability are important measures/descriptors of the system. In a feed-forward loop, level 4 stabilities influence the level 1 landscape for new interactions.

The four levels of the dynamic model allow description of empathy at different and interacting timescales.



Here is the revised model that takes better account of the multiple phenomena, capacities and processes that fall under the label 'empathy' across disciplines (discussed in Working Paper 3) . The four interacting levels are now Green (1) – Yellow (2) – Blue (3) – Pink (4). I have also added the light coloured fluffy cloud to indicate moral choices and intentions that participants might bring to a particular interaction and that will influence the on-going talk or activity.

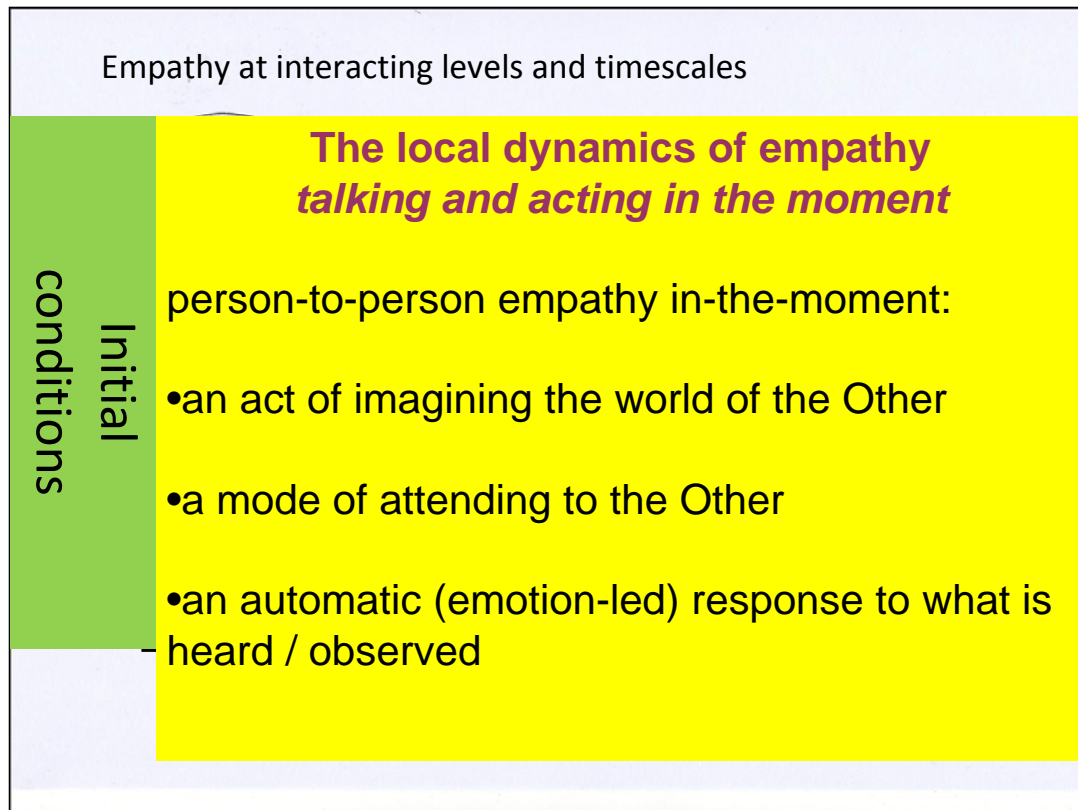
The following slides unpack each level with what we know form the literature and from LwU findings so far.

Empathy operates at interacting levels and timescales

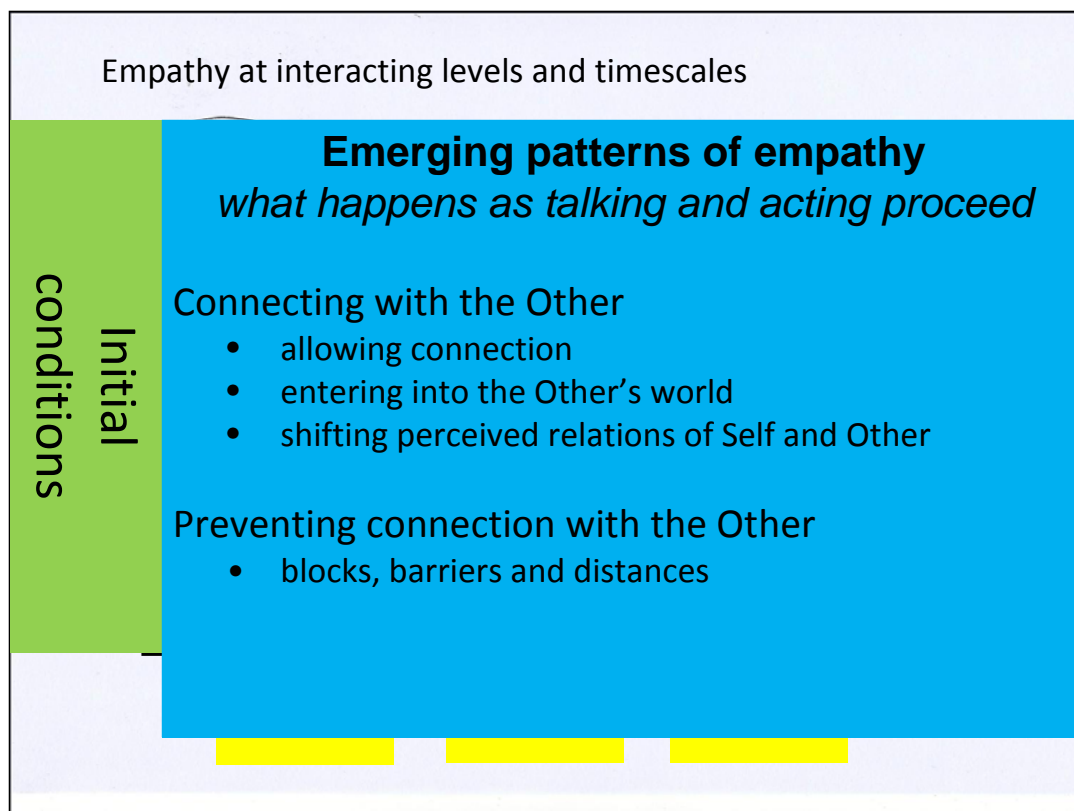
Initial conditions for empathy:
how it is before starting to talk and act

- preparations for dialogue and action;
- personal and socio-cultural attitudes and beliefs about the Other;
- knowledge and understanding;
- motivations for being there;
- personal disposition or capacity for empathy

Level 1: Initial conditions or starting points for interaction and dialogue

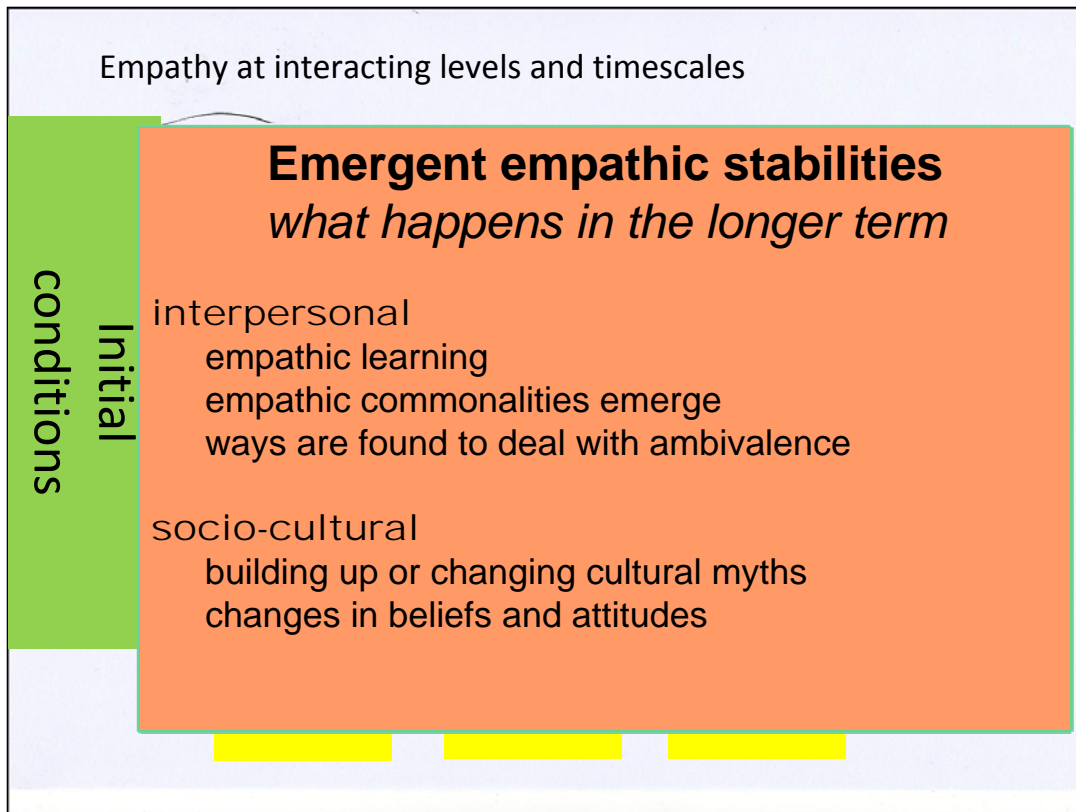


Level 2: what happens when people engage in dialogue or action.

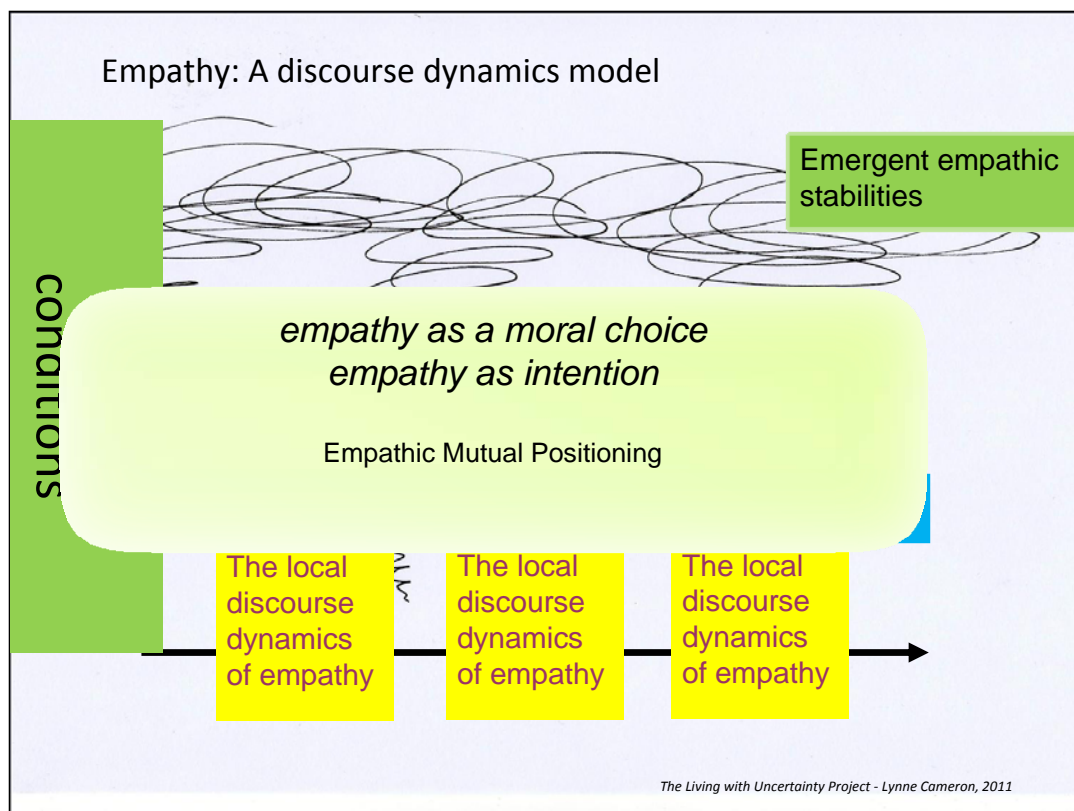


Level 3: How things change over the course of a conversation or meeting

How empathy is prevented is the topic of a forthcoming Working Paper which introduces the notion of 'dyspathy'. Here I have marked it a place with some of the metaphors people use to describe it.



Level 4: personal and socio-cultural long term stabilities in attitudes, beliefs, values, ideas



What happens in talk and activity can be altered by deliberate moral choices (Haidt, 2007) made by participants or by intentions that they consciously attend to.

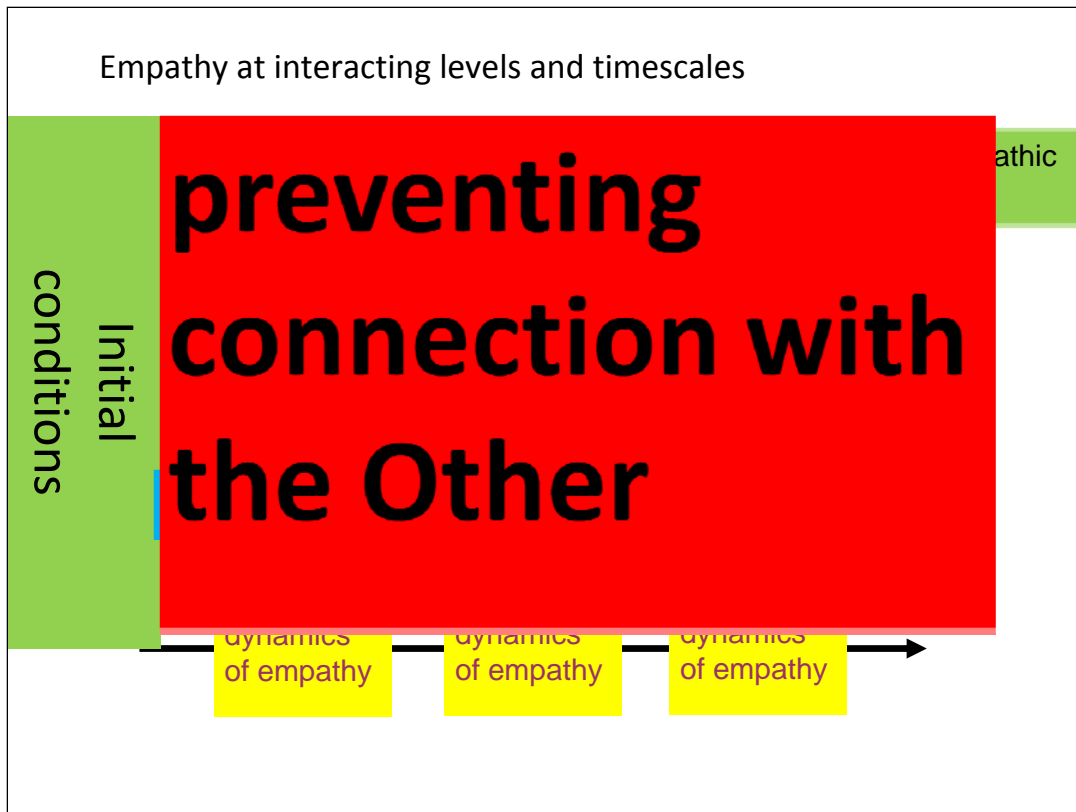
With Bruna Seu, we have developed this idea into a new concept “Empathic Mutual Positioning” (Seu & Cameron, under review)

Empathic Mutual Positioning is benevolent and intentional, but not necessarily or exclusively conscious, positioning of the other. It involves:

1. a **commitment** to granting each participant in the conciliation process the right to be listened to and have their experience considered empathically - i.e. with an intention to understand when explaining themselves and their actions. **(a force)**
2. a psychological openness to be changed by the process. **(a psychic and psychosocial process)**

Empathic Mutual Positioning acts as:

a reminder to each other that the participants “come in peace”, whilst maintaining their differences.
a willingness to try to deal with the emotional ambivalence likely to be generated by listening to the other.



Work in progress – dyspathy and preventing connection across alterity....

References

Cameron L. (2011) *Metaphor and Reconciliation*,
New York: Routledge.

Haidt J. (2007) The new synthesis in moral
psychology. *Science* 316: 998-1002.

Seu, B. & L. Cameron (under review) The
dynamics of mutual positioning.