The Boundaries of Empathy

"…empathy has been presented as a dispositional trait, a cognitive skill, a physiological reaction or some combination of these components. Is it an innate trait? A cognitive skill? Is it a feeling, a thought, or an action? Can it be taught? Can it be learned? If we have it, can we develop more?"

- *Gerdes, Karen E. & Elizabeth A. Segal, A Social Work Model of Empathy (2009)*

Recently, in the middle of a conversation, I was asked a question that brought a long-lingering thought to the surface. Did I think it was important to be empathetic in the sector that we worked in? In the few seconds of pause that I took before answering the question, I realised this is something I felt strongly about while simultaneously being a subject I did not see receiving the attention it was due.

All of us have grown up to recognise empathy as being something worth emulating, aspiring to, honing. The academic world defines this emotion/trait/process in multiple ways – intentionality towards others' experiences, a sense of presence and attention towards others, or the more formal "act of perceiving, using, experiencing and responding to the emotional state and ideas of another person."

Yet, much of the theoretical, academic engagement with the concept of empathy seems to be driven by psychologists, counsellors and therapists. Which brings me back to my original question. What of us – development sector workers, field staff, NGO management and leadership, M&E professionals? What about all of us whose core professional skill does not lie in listening – we are, on the other hand, teachers and community doctors and project managers – but find ourselves interacting with stories of pain and difficulty and scarcity and trauma every day? What does empathy look like for us?

Over the years, I have found that my experience with empathy is deeply linked to my ideas of professional ethics. As an external consultant and service provider, all too often, my interactions with "beneficiary communities" are fleeting. We go in to conduct our interviews and a half day later, we are out. Yet, in those six hours, our discussion guides drive questions that prod and pry through our respondents' most trying times – poverty, sickness, family trauma. In those moments, in my mind, empathy is more responsibility than choice.

Academia is not on the same page about whether empathy needs to lead to "action" of some sort. Gerdes and Segal argue for conscious decision making as being an integral part of being empathetic, while Decety and colleagues stop short of action, focusing instead on affect sharing (experiencing similar emotions), self-awareness, mental flexibility (the capacity to imagine others' situation), and emotional regulation (modulating subjective feelings associated with emotion). Outside the context of research, these models and linear understandings of the process fall apart. In the field, it is up to each of us to experience the emotions being presented to us, identify our spaces of action, define our empathy.

Often, when on the field, I find myself being more willing to share. When I ask questions about their life, I consciously volunteer (often disconnected) stories from my own. I colour in the lines with everyday details. While these tactics do not often speak directly to their experiences, I have found that it creates spaces for two-way communication. In that fleeting moment, there is a semblance of a relationship built, however impermanent. Perhaps this willingness to be vulnerable is my action? Or maybe it is my tool to regulate the emotions of fieldwork, couching heavy conversation within light-hearted banter. Even as I ponder these questions for myself, I am certain of the need to discuss this together.

Today, I am only left with a host of questions. Who are we in the field? What foot do we put forward? What is empathy in the development sector? Where do its boundaries lie? Given the unquestionably collective nature of our work, I'd love to explore them together.

References:

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