

# Using Art to Foster Empathy: A Literature Review

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## Abstract

Historically, empathy is rooted in the domain of art, especially visual arts. The term “Einfühlung” (in-feeling) in German stemmed from the Greek word “*empathia*” (feeling with). However, its concept in art has shifted a few times since the 19th century definition, including its position from art appreciation to artmaking. Nowadays, some art practitioners in the art field and other related disciplines have claimed that art can be used to foster empathy. This paper investigates how the concept of empathy has been explored in recent literature and how it has been activated to foster empathy. It employs integrative literature review as its main method of data gathering and analysis. It has found a total of 180 literature, which is narrowed down to 27 relevant ones to be analyzed. This study found that there are three key moments in the conceptual shift of empathy in art. Moreover, it also underlines that art appreciation activity is still primary to artmaking in the effort to foster empathy.

**Keywords:** *visual arts, empathy, literature review*

## 1 Introduction

In popular dictionaries, empathy is defined as a capacity to understand and share the feelings and experiences of others while imagining they were our own [1]. The word derives from the Greek word “*empathia*” which means “feeling with”. In modern science, the term was coined in the early 1800s in German; “*Einfühlung*”, which means “feeling into” [2]. The capacity to empathize is described as being able to feel how others feel or feeling it “with” them. The term is often confused with “sympathy”, which means understanding how someone else feels without essentially feeling it ourselves or feeling “for” them. This phenomenon has been observed in the field of psychology and was used in Freud’s method of psychoanalysis, especially in his concept of “countertransference”. It was described as “a result of the patient’s influence on [the physician’s] unconscious feelings” [3]. Whereas in the beginning he was hesitant and tended to reject the experience, Freud later on benefitted from countertransference as a way to better understand his patients’ experience.

In her book titled “*Homo Aestheticus*”, Ellen Dissanayake summarized the history of empathy in art [4]. She began her historical account with the term “*Einfühlung*” used by Theodor Lipps in the title of his essay “*Asthetische Einfühlung*” (translated as “Aesthetic Empathy”) in 1900 and again in his 1903 paper titled “*Einfühlung, innere Nachahmung*”, which described the phenomenon as “inner imitation”. He argued that one’s capacity to appreciate an artwork depended on their ability to project their personality into the art object. In Wilhem Worringer’s prominent book, *Abstraktion und Einfühlung* (1953), he sharpened the polarization happening during early Modern art movements by embedding the notion of empathy only to naturalistic

art. Later on, Heinrich Wölfflin, an influential art educator, further pushed aside empathy as an important aspect in artmaking. In England, Vernon Lee elaborated the term “Einfühlung” into what she firstly translated into “sympathy” (1906) and later became “empathy” (1913), which she referred to as “a tendency to merge the activities of the perceiving subject with the qualities of the perceived object”. Later on, in “Architecture of Humanism”, Geoffrey Scott introduced the term as “a revolutionary aesthetic”; which continued to be used for decades. The novelist, Rebecca West, for example, wrote “the active power of empathy which makes the creative artist, or the passive power of empathy which makes the appreciator of art”. However, the term was similarly pushed aside as soon as Clive Bell and Roger Fry, prominent British Modern art critics, championed the nonrepresentational art. Although the term was no longer used, the idea of bodily sensation in artmaking and art appreciation was carried on, especially in Victor Lowenfeld’s notion of “haptic perception” (1939) and R.W. Pickford’s adoption of the term in *Psychology* (1972). The pinnacle of the concept of empathy is found in Rudolf Arnheim’s writings on art. Ellen Dissanayake concluded her account with a statement that in contemporary art criticism or aesthetics, empathy is an overlooked aspect.

This paper aims to see the missing link from the last notable account on empathy in art to how it is explored in the last decade, from 2009 to 2019. It serves as a foundation to a future experimentation using art-based approach to foster empathy for students in higher education.

## 2 Study design: Integrative Literature Review

Torraco (2016) describes the integrative literature review as “a distinctive form of research that generates new knowledge about the topic reviewed” [5]. It is primarily used for topics that have not been comprehensively reviewed during a certain period of time as well as new growing topics on an issue. To map the development of the concept of empathy and the application of such concepts in art, this paper uses the steps and checklist in the Torraco model (Fig. 1). The body of literature is gathered from Google Scholar search engine in September 2019 that comprises different publishing sources and scopes. The search focuses on literatures that were published within the last decade (2009-2019) and uses “empathy” + “art” as keywords in the title. There were 118 articles, book chapters, and unpublished citations found, which was lower than the assumed number. Subsequently, an exclusion method was applied to select relevant literatures. This step was done manually by screening through available previews or abstracts using the following criteria: 1) literature discusses concepts of empathy; 2) literature discusses the relationship between empathy and visual art or Aesthetics; 3) literature is based on application of art-based approaches to foster empathy. It narrows down to 40 relevant articles which to be analyzed and discussed in the result section of this paper.

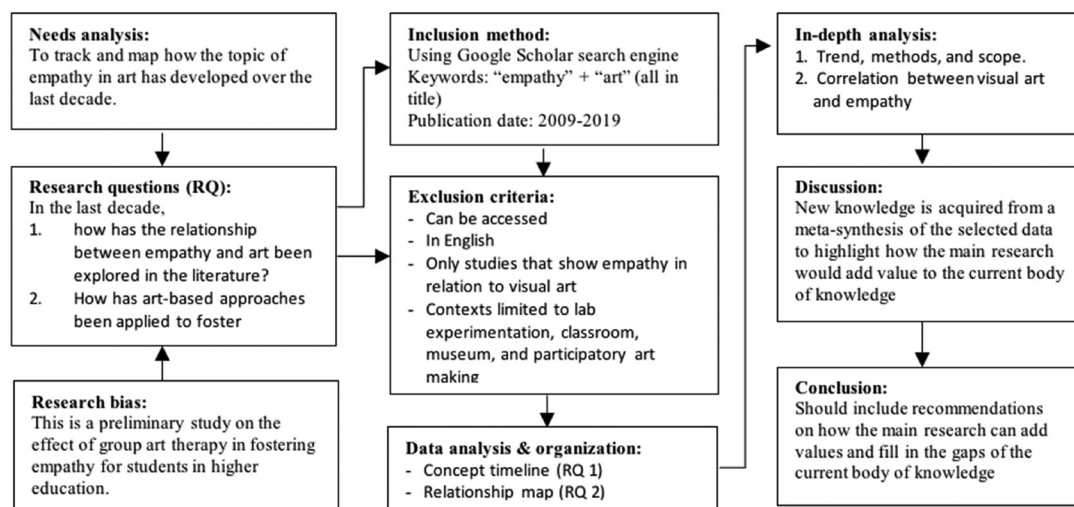


Figure 1. Research flow chart based on the Torraco model

Analysis is carried out manually, without using software or other digital tools, due to limitation in resources. This process is done to understand the trend in the studies that highlight the relationship between visual art and empathy throughout the decade, as well as methods and used in those studies. Additionally, the scope of these studies is also presented to see in which disciplines or areas has art been used to foster empathy. Moreover, a deeper analysis investigates the results of the studies to determine the findings in empathy and its relation to art. Visual charts are used to display the findings; and the discussion focuses on whether or not these studies correlate with the findings on the concept of empathy and what type of artistic activities are mainly used to foster empathy.

### 3 Results and discussion

#### 3.1 Concepts of Empathy in Art

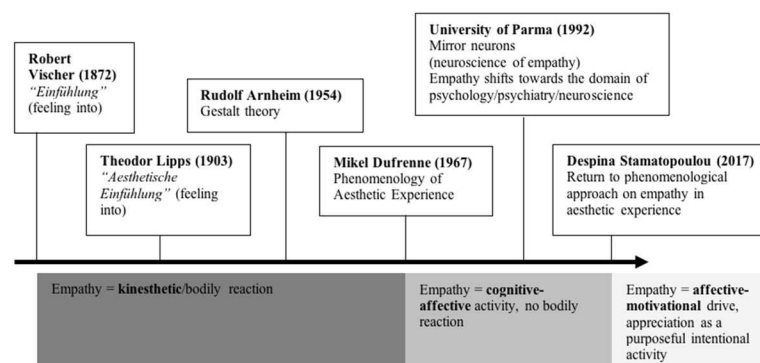
One of the recent influential books on empathy was written by Susan Lanzoni, a historian of psychology, psychiatry, and neuroscience, in 2018 titled "Empathy: A History" [6]. She revisited concepts of empathy since Theodor Lipps to the contemporary ones. She summarized that during the early 20th century, when modern psychology was still captivated by the effort to measure human behaviors, empathy was quickly set aside and reduced to the notion of "observable bodily imitation". Even so, many early modern psychologists strived to be able to operate empathy, especially in the workforce and education. It is during these times that empathy shifted from its roots in the art to its new domain in psychology. In the postwar era, especially after the Cold War, empathy was regarded as a valuable aspect in building better social connections. However, it was not until in early 1990s when the neuroscientists in Parma, Italy, discovered the mirror neurons, empathy finally achieved its scientific evidence. Nowadays, people go back to empathy to try to solve multidimensional problems in politics, economy, and even environment. Nonetheless, its connection with the arts has long been forgotten and replaced with the neurological model.

In regards to art, Lanzoni noted that there has also been a shift in the notion of empathy. She stated that empathy was used to describe the capacity of a person to project their inner feelings

into an art object, but now it describes the effort to imitate the artist's feelings to know their artistic intentions. From Lipps to Arnheim, empathy was understood as the kinesthetic experience when someone looks at an artwork, it is as if they become one with the perceived lines, shapes, and colors (or even subject matters). However, since the mirror neurons theory emerged, it seemed to move towards a more cognitive model. Psychological and psychiatric experiments are normally done to record brain activities during art appreciation. It gives 'empathy' a rather cold and scientific vibe. How can an activity that used to be active and moving shifted to be understood as merely a series of electrical activities in the brain?

To understand the missing link between the two, Mikel Dufrenne's phenomenological approach to aesthetic experience would shed the light [7]. Dufrenne never used the term "empathy", however the same meaning can be derived from his account on feeling in aesthetic experience. Different from the previous reference to bodily response, he wrote concerning Wagner's opera titled "Tristan and Isolde", "Although I am not led to the point of calling a doctor to attend Tristan, I am led far enough to be moved, to fear, to hope, to live with him in some sense" [8]. Dufrenne's account on feeling shares the same understanding as empathy, however his description of the phenomenon tends to be more cognitive-affective rather than kinesthetic. Reading his passage, we could infer that the part of "being moved" does not mean that he wanted to move in reality; rather, in his mind he felt as if he could feel the same way as the characters. Moreover, there is no record of any physical reaction, so it can be assumed that the focus of empathy during art appreciation was no longer on the kinesthetic experience.

A recent theory by Despina Stamatopoulou highlighted that empathy in art appreciation is essentially different to what it is in a social context [9]. Firstly, art appreciation does not provide reciprocity like interpersonal relationships do; secondly, art appreciation is not a goal-directed action; lastly, there is asymmetry on the action between the beholder (appreciator) and the beheld (artwork), meaning that no matter how moved the appreciator is, they cannot do anything real towards the artwork. Hence, she puts forward the idea of affective-motivational dynamic in the aesthetic experience. Her theory posits that due to the above-mentioned conditions, "aesthetic experience can become a field of 'becoming instead of being', while the beholder retains the 'intersubjective ties' with the art object (engagement)". Here she implies that art appreciation is an action that does not happen accidentally, on the contrary it is purposeful. Phenomenologically, she adds that the appreciators experience a dynamic between the I (subjective) and me (objective) during the art appreciation. Consequently, empathy happens when the appreciators consciously spend enough time to let the process unfold and the inner dialogue deepen, so that our emotional responses recalibrate along the way.

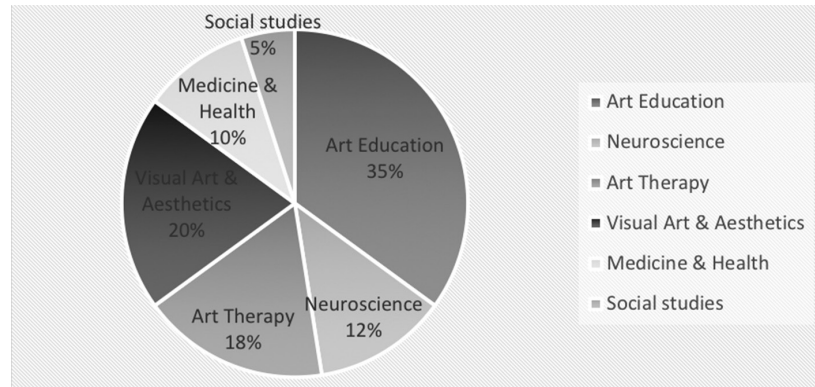


**Figure 2.** Timeline of concepts of empathy and the paradigm changes over time





context of visual art practice/aesthetics and art therapy, the numbers are half than that. Other contexts where the relationship between visual art and empathy is explored are neuroscience, medicine, and social studies (Fig. 5).



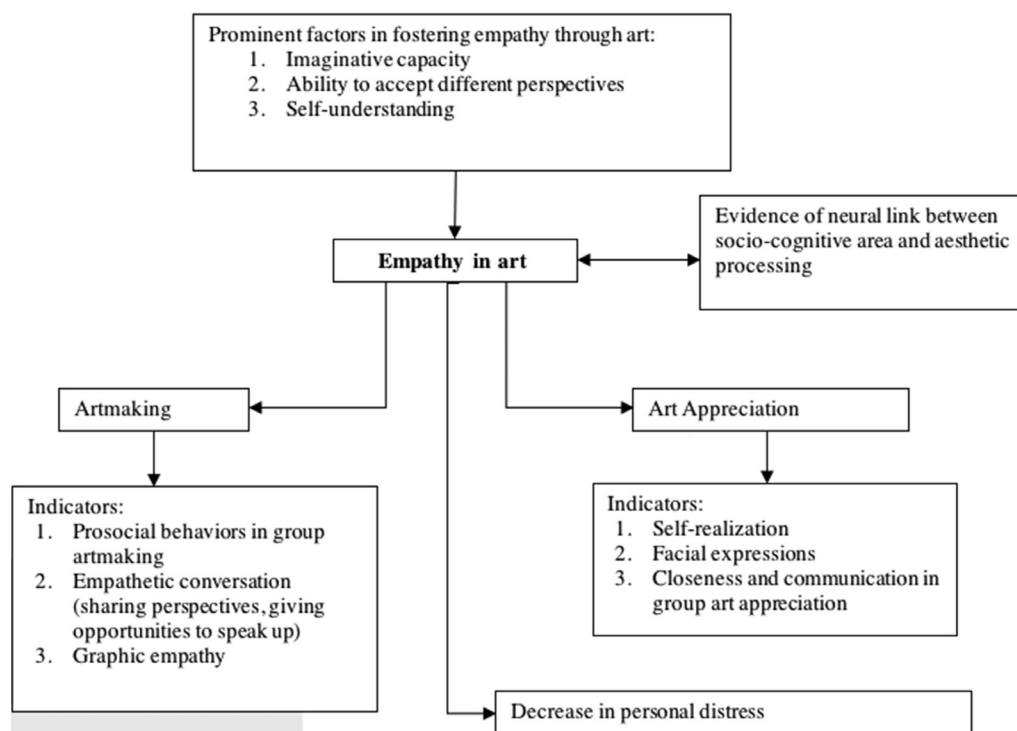
**Figure 5.** The contexts in which studies focus on visual art and empathy

During a deeper investigation on the results of the studies, several findings come into light. Most studies confirm that engagement in art, both during creation [11, 12] and appreciation process [13, 14, 15], increase the capacity in empathy. Some quantitative analysis use psychological tools, such as Basic Empathy Scale (BES), Jefferson Empathy Scale (JES), Toronto Empathy Questionnaire (TEQ), Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI), and Identification With All Humanity (IWAH) to measure the impact of artistic engagement on empathy.

Most qualitative studies determine the increase in empathy from observation and interview with the participants. Catterall [10] links empathy with prosocial behavior, such as volunteerism, with the opportunity the students have to observe and depict a human figure. Potash et al [11] recorded medical students' responses that indicate empathy, such as "put us into patient's shoes". In the following study, he described how empathy also manifested in a student's response artwork. In her experiment, Degarrod [12] highlighted how the collaborative aspect in the artmaking is in line with the process of empathy, in which both involve an emotional and imaginative engagement. She described how her discussion with a refugee evolved in the emotional level, using word such as 'emphatic request'.

You [13] found that an integrated empathy-based learning in class has not only impacted on the level of empathy between students (e.g. reduced abusive language among peers), but also between students-teacher (e.g. closeness and communication). Hurley [14], whose study used appreciation process as a means of artistic engagement, reported participants' response of being able to connect with the emotion and mood of the artist. Similarly, Ziff [15] found that students who were able to reflect feelings could also connect it to cultivating empathic relationships with clients; he recorded such response, "It helped me realize that while empathy is inherent for me, conveying empathy is more difficult valuable....".

When exploring which factors influence such result, studies show that imaginative capacity is prominent; followed by the ability to accept different perspectives and self-understanding. Interestingly, in neuroscientific studies the results affirm a neural link between socio-cognitive area of the brain which is usually interpreted as the region of empathy with aesthetic processing. In one study, the results also show that the increase of empathy after engagement in artistic activities correlates with the decrease of personal distress [11].



**Figure 6.** Relationship map of findings on empathy in the reviewed literature

The findings suggest a map of relationship between art and empathy across the literature for in the last decade (Fig. 6). There are at least three identifiable artistic aspects that foster empathy, namely imaginative capacity, ability to accept different perspectives, and self-understanding. These are present in any creative processes and have been found to be determinant variables in the studies. It is also interesting to note that there have been evidences in neuroscience studies between socio-cognitive area and aesthetic processing. This suggests that the study of art might also be beneficial for non-art students.

As expected, art is established in two activities throughout the studies, which are artmaking and art appreciation. Each activity proposes different indicators to decide an increase on empathy. In artmaking activities, the indicators include prosocial behaviors in group artmaking, empathetic conversation (manifested in the ability to share perspectives and give opportunities to speak up), and graphic empathy (or visual resonance). In art appreciation activities, they include self-realization, facial expression, and overt group closeness and communication. Additionally, some findings suggest that group artmaking vis-a-vis the increase of empathy might decrease personal distress.

## 4 Conclusion

Findings show that there is a shift in the concept of empathy throughout the years, not only in its meaning but also its domain. Empathy stemmed from art and was understood as a physical reaction during art appreciation. It shifted towards the domain of Psychology and was considered as a cognitive-affective activity, and not between subject and (art) object but interpersonally. Recently, the concept moved in the direction of phenomenological meaning that seemed to synthesize both concepts. In this current thinking, empathy is seen as an affective-motivational drive.

The deep analysis of the literature reveals other interesting findings. Experiment is the most popular method in research on empathy and it is commonly tested in the context of art education. Interpreting the findings from each literature, a more coherent relationship can be found. Firstly, in order to foster empathy, there are factors that come into play, such as imaginative capacity, ability to accept different perspectives, and self-understanding. Secondly, there is an evidence of neural link between socio-cognitive area and aesthetic processing. Thirdly, both artmaking and art appreciation activities show indicators of empathetic behaviors. Lastly, in one instance it was found that the increase in empathy correlates to the decrease of personal distress.

## 5 Acknowledgement

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