

Mark V. Redmond

# Social Decentering

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A Theory of Other-Orientation Encompassing Empathy  
and Perspective-Taking

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Dedicated to Dr. Frank Dance, Dr. Carl Larson, and the late Dr. Alton Barbour and Dr. Al Goldberg. It's been a long journey since each of them guided my dissertation on empathy and communication competence, but the influence of their wisdom never wanes. Also, in remembrance of fellow students who began that journey with me but who are no longer here to see the finale: Dr. Norm Watson, Dr. Jim Toulhuizen, and Dr. Marc Routhier.

This book is also dedicated to all those who seek to make this a better world with their willingness to consider the perspectives, values, beliefs, thoughts, feelings, and experiences of those who provide them love and support, and those who challenge and confront them.

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## Preface/Introduction

The following comments are intended to align your expectations as a reader with those of mine as the writer by primarily explaining what is not included in this book. If you have elected to read this book of your own accord (versus an assigned reading for a class), you might be expecting a thorough, detailed discussion of empathy and perspective-taking, but you will not find that. Many years ago, after considerable time reviewing the literature on empathy, perspective-taking, and role-taking, I wrote a convention paper where I detailed the confusion surrounding the meaning and measurement of those concepts. As a solution, I decided to erase the board and start with a blank slate and a new term. Since that time, others have also languished over the confusion of the meaning of the terms empathy and perspective-taking, often merging them together in attempts to more clearly identify boundaries and meaning resulting in such terms as empathic perspective-taking, affective perspective-taking, and cognitive empathy. Other scholars have also discussed these issues of conceptual confusion, so there is no need to rehash those issues here.

Instead, the focus of this book is to explain and expand on the theory of social decentering, though I will review research and theory on empathy and perspective-taking, insofar as they provide support and clarity to social decentering. I originally published an abbreviated description of social decentering and a measure of social decentering in the *Journal of Research in Personality* (Redmond, 1995). This book includes a comprehensive discussion of social decentering theory which I argue is a multidimensional theory that encompasses empathy and perspective-taking. Among the goals of the theory is to provide a framework that solves many of the issues that have confronted research and theory in empathy and perspective-taking. But the social decentering theory goes beyond simply combining knowledge about empathy and perspective-taking, to provide an innovative model that explains the process people use when analyzing another person's thoughts, feelings, and dispositions.

Initially, I drew from the work of Jean Piaget (1950, 1974) in using the term decentering, but I came to realize the use of that term would prove too limiting, since for Piaget, decentering focused on children's recognition of physical perspectives. My interest was in how people apply the same general process, not just to their physical world, but to their entire social world – more specifically, to seeing the world from another person's perspective. Thus, I added the term social to decentering to more accurately reflect the phenomenon I wished to study – social decentering.

I believe that social decentering theory is the theory that would emerge after you shake together all of the main conceptual components associated with empathy, perspective-taking, and role-taking and then pour them out into a single mold. The theory of social decentering reflects a way of organizing the most significant elements of other-oriented concepts to create a unified theory. But more importantly, my goal was to create a theory that is a true reflection of the social cognitive process that takes place when a



person considers another person's dispositions within a given situation. I use the term disposition as a catchall term because I got tired of listing the multitude of elements a person might review when considering another person's world – their perspectives, thoughts, feelings, attitudes, needs, world view, beliefs, values, biases, education, experiences, race, sex, age, and so on. Nonetheless, when explaining social decentering, I refer to efforts to consider another person's thoughts, feelings, and other dispositions. I explicitly identify thoughts and feelings in addition to disposition to emphasize two of the major elements that constitute other-orientation – the cognitive and the affective.

In choosing to focus on social decentering as a form of social cognition, other areas of theory and research related to empathy and perspective-taking are excluded. For example, I do not review or include theory and research related to empathy from a neurological perspective. The reason for excluding this material is again to differentiate a conscientious process from a neurological reaction such as motor mimicry. A significant amount of research that involves mapping neurological responses to perceptions of others has resulted in identifying mirror neurons. On the most basic level, mirror neurons occur when the same neuron that is triggered in one animal is triggered in another animal who observes the first. I use this to explain to my wife why I grunt when I'm watching football on TV and grunt when a player is tackled – my physiological reaction or motor mimicry is mildly similar to what the player experienced – my neurons are mirroring his. One can argue that my neurological response then provides me with information about what the player must have experienced which provides a basis for empathizing with him. Bayne and Hays (2017) point out that knowing what neural pathways are illuminated in response to another's emotions does not provide a "full realization of empathy in an interpersonal context" (p. 33). In addition, discovering shared neuropathways fails to reflect the other thoughts that occur as observers experience emotions. The social cognitive aspects of social decentering go beyond neuro-emotional responses as individuals think about the person, the situation, and themselves as they make sense of the emotional response. Thus, to maintain the focus on the deliberative process that surrounds being other oriented, the research and theory related to the neurological perspective is not included.

Another reaction that is somewhat akin to unconscious motor mimicry that is associated strongly with empathy is altruism. A considerable amount of research has been devoted to understand people's tendency to be altruistic and the affect that empathy has on altruistic behavior. Batson's empathy-altruism hypothesis posits that empathic concern for another elicits altruistic motivation (Batson & Shaw, 1991). The hypothesis was generated to counter the claims that altruism actually stems from egoistic concern. Inherent in the ongoing study of the relationship between empathy and altruism are issues of definition and assessment. The confusion that exists regarding empathy that I mentioned above also interferes with efforts to understand empathy and altruism. Focusing only on the application of empathy to altruism results in failing to appreciate the many other ways that being other-oriented affects our behaviors and relationships. Rather than getting somewhat sidelined in my efforts to present a

comprehensive introduction to social decentering, this text does not directly examine altruism. But I have included discussion about social decentering producing efforts to help others.

Just as Piaget was interested in how children's cognitive development allows them to recognize differences in physical perspectives through decentering, other scholars have examined the development of empathy in children to determine at what age children sense the feelings of others. A considerable amount of theory and research on empathy, perspective-taking, and role-taking focuses on their development, particularly in children and adolescents. But the focus of this book is on the role other-orientation plays in adult interactions and interpersonal relationships.

There is little doubt that our social experiences in childhood through adolescence establish the foundation on which other-orientation builds as we become adults. When we reach adulthood, our use of empathy, perspective-taking, and social decentering takes on an important role that was not present during childhood – developing and maintaining intimate relationships. That use requires refinement and expansion of the skills associated with being empathic in childhood. For the most part, I avoided incorporating into my discussion, the results of research on empathy and perspective-taking that centered on samples of children or teens because of the uncertainty as to how validly those results apply to adults. In recognition of the unique ways in which adults develop and apply other-oriented processes and to provide a central focus to this text, social decentering is discussed in terms of how adults use it in their daily interactions and relationships with other adults.

Whether you are convinced after reading this monograph about the validity of social decentering theory or not, I hope you will have gained at least some innovative ways to think about how people make sense of their social world and the significant role that taking into consideration another person's thoughts, feelings, and dispositions plays in our lives. I also hope that this monograph answers some of the extant questions concerning other-oriented processes, and that I have raised a few worthy questions of my own that might inspire your own journey.

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