The Empathetic and Sympathetic Posture as an Ethical Tool in Interpersonal Communication: The Case of Autistic People in Morocco

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Abstract	Original Research Article

This research explores the role of empathic and sympathetic posture as an ethical tool in interpersonal communication with autistic people in Morocco. The study is set in a Moroccan context where social and educational inclusion policies for autistic people remain embryonic, exacerbating their marginalization. Through a qualitative methodology combining semi-directive interviews, participant observations and thematic data analysis, this research aims to understand how empathy and sympathy can be mobilized to improve the quality of interactions while respecting the dignity and specific needs of people with autism. The results show that empathy is perceived as an essential condition for establishing trusting relationships with autistic people, but that it requires constant adaptation to local cognitive and cultural particularities. At the same time, sympathy is seen as an active and intentional posture, making it possible to respond to the immediate needs of people with autism. Participants also emphasize the importance of family and community dynamics in supporting people with autism, a feature specific to the Moroccan socio-cultural context. The discussion highlights the original contributions of this research, particularly its exploration of the cultural dimensions of communication with people with autism. It also highlights the practical implications of the findings, notably for training professionals, raising social awareness and inclusive public policies. However, the limitations of the study, such as the modest sample size and the localized nature of the results, are acknowledged, calling for broader, comparative future research. In conclusion, this research reminds us that communication with autistic people must be guided by principles of respect, dignity and autonomy, while taking into account local cultural realities. It constitutes a call to action to build a more inclusive and empathetic society, where each individual finds his or her place.

Keywords: Empathie, Sympathie, Autisme, Communication interpersonnelle, Maroc.

I. INTRODUCTION

Interpersonal communication, as a dynamic and multidimensional process, constitutes a fundamental pillar of human interactions. It relies on a constellation of cognitive, emotional, and social skills that enable individuals to share ideas, exchange emotions, and build meaningful relationships. However, when this communication takes place within the context of interactions with autistic individuals, it becomes a particularly complex field of exploration, requiring heightened attention to the underlying mechanisms of mutual understanding. Autistic individuals, often perceived through the lens of their cognitive and behavioral differences, experience relational challenges specific to the interpretation of social signals, emotional regulation, and adaptation to sociocultural norms. In this context, it is imperative to reflect on tools capable of enhancing the quality of interactions while respecting the integrity and autonomy of these individuals.

The importance of this issue is amplified in societies like Morocco, where policies for social and educational inclusion remain largely embryonic. Indeed, although efforts have been made in recent years to improve the living conditions of autistic individuals, they continue to face structural and cultural obstacles that hinder their full participation in society. As Lahbib (2018) highlights, autistic children in Morocco are often confronted with a lack of adapted educational resources, persistent social stigma, and marginalization in public spaces. These realities call for a deeper reflection on ways to promote more inclusive, empathetic, and ethical communication,

capable of addressing the specific needs of this population while taking into account local cultural particularities. This is not only a practical challenge but also a profoundly humanistic issue that engages our collective responsibility as a society.

From this perspective, the empathic and sympathetic posture emerges as an essential lever for transforming communication dynamics with autistic individuals. Empathy, defined as the ability to perceive and share the emotions of others, transcends mere verbal exchanges to touch upon the affective and relational dimensions of human interactions. Sympathy, on the other hand, involves an active emotional response aimed at supporting others in their distress or difficulties. Together, these two postures constitute powerful tools for bridging divergent cognitive functioning and fostering better mutual understanding. However, their application in the context of autism requires rigorous adaptation, taking into account the specificities of the individuals concerned as well as the sociocultural norms that shape perceptions and practices locally.

It is within this framework that the present research is situated, with the primary objective of exploring the role of empathic and sympathetic postures as ethical tools in interpersonal communication with autistic individuals in Morocco. This study seeks to address a central question: how can these postures be mobilized to improve the quality of interactions while respecting the dignity, autonomy, and specific needs of autistic individuals? To achieve this, we rely on a critical review of the scientific literature, enriched by empirical data collected from various actors involved in the care and support of autistic individuals. Our ambition is to propose concrete strategies adapted to the Moroccan context while contributing to a better understanding of the ethical and relational dynamics at play in these interactions.

Finally, this research is driven by a deep desire to fill existing gaps in the academic literature on autism in Morocco. While international studies have extensively explored the clinical, neurological, and psychological dimensions of autism, few have examined the ethical and cultural aspects of communication with autistic individuals in non-Western contexts. This omission leaves a significant void, preventing a full grasp of the specific challenges faced by autistic individuals in societies like Morocco. By shedding light on these realities, we hope to make a meaningful contribution to academic debates and social practices while paving the way for new research and action perspectives. After all, behind every statistic, theory, and concept, there are human beings who aspire to be understood, respected, and integrated into a society that, too often, struggles to fully embrace them.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review constitutes an essential foundation for understanding the theoretical and empirical underpinnings of this research. It revolves around a critical exploration of existing works on empathy, sympathy, autism, and their intersection within the framework of interpersonal communication. These concepts, although often addressed separately in academic literature, reveal their full richness when analyzed together, particularly in specific cultural contexts such as that of Morocco. Through this review, we aim to identify the major advancements made in these fields while highlighting the gaps that justify the relevance of our study.

Empathy, defined as the ability to perceive, understand, and share the emotions of others, has been the subject of considerable research over recent decades. The work of Baron-Cohen (2009) notably contributed to conceptualizing autism through the lens of the Empathizing-Systemizing (E-S) theory, which posits that autistic individuals exhibit significant difficulty in interpreting the emotions and intentions of others. While enlightening, this approach has often been criticized for its tendency to pathologize the cognitive differences of autistic individuals, neglecting their potential to develop alternative forms of social interaction. In parallel, the research of Decety and Jackson (2004) explored the neurological bases of empathy, emphasizing its crucial role in human interactions. These authors demonstrated that empathy relies on a combination of cognitive and emotional processes, involving specific brain regions such as the prefrontal cortex and the insula. These findings provide a valuable neuroscientific framework for understanding the mechanisms underlying communication with autistic individuals. However, they remain largely focused on Western populations, leaving aside the cultural realities of non-Western contexts.

In contrast, sympathy, often conflated with empathy, is distinguished by its active and intentional dimension. Hoffman (2000) defines sympathy as an affective response aimed at supporting others in their distress or difficulties. This posture, although less explored in the context of autism, plays an essential role in building trust and solidarity. Rogers (1957), in his humanistic approach, emphasizes the importance of empathic listening and benevolence in therapeutic relationships—a principle that can be transposed to interactions with autistic individuals. However, few studies have examined how these concepts can be adapted to the specificities of autistic individuals, particularly in contexts where social and cultural norms profoundly influence perceptions of otherness.

The Moroccan context, in particular, presents specific characteristics that warrant special attention. As highlighted by Moussaoui and Kadri (2010), Moroccan society is marked by strong collective values, where family and community solidarity play a central role. These cultural dynamics directly influence perceptions of autism and communication practices with affected individuals. Lahbib (2018) highlights the challenges faced by autistic children in Morocco, particularly in terms of educational and social inclusion. These works reveal that public policies remain insufficient to address the specific needs of this population, exacerbating their marginalization. In this context, it becomes crucial to rethink communication tools to better integrate the ethical and cultural dimensions that shape interactions with autistic individuals.

Despite these advancements, several persistent gaps remain in the literature. First, few studies have adopted a transcultural perspective to explore the specificities of communication with autistic individuals in non-Western contexts. Existing research tends to favor universalist approaches, often disconnected from

local realities. Second, the ethical dimensions of communication with autistic individuals remain largely underexplored. Finally, contradictions between clinical approaches and sociocultural perspectives continue to fuel academic debates without leading to clear consensus. These gaps fully justify the need for in-depth research on the role of empathy and sympathy as ethical tools in interpersonal communication with autistic individuals in Morocco.

In summary, this literature review highlights the richness of existing works while underscoring the challenges that persist. It provides a solid conceptual framework for addressing the complex issues of empathy, sympathy, and autism, while calling for a more nuanced reflection on the cultural and ethical realities that influence these dynamics. Behind every theory, model, and statistical data, there are human beings who aspire to be understood, respected, and integrated into a society that, too often, struggles to fully embrace them. This research precisely aims to bridge this gap by proposing concrete avenues to transform human interactions into genuine bridges of understanding and solidarity.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The methodology adopted in this research is based on a rigorous and thoughtful design, aiming to explore in depth the dynamics of interpersonal communication with autistic individuals in Morocco. This methodological approach is rooted in a qualitative perspective, prioritizing a holistic and contextual understanding of the phenomena under study. Indeed, given the complexity of human interactions and the richness of the experiences lived by autistic individuals, a qualitative approach allows for capturing nuances, ambiguities, and emotional dimensions that often escape quantitative methods. This methodological decision is not trivial: it reflects our desire to give a voice to those who are too often silenced, shedding light on their perceptions, challenges, and aspirations.

Data were collected through a combination of carefully selected methodological tools, chosen for their relevance and adaptability to the context of the study. Semi-structured interviews served as the primary data collection instrument, allowing participants to express themselves freely while being guided by a precise thematic framework. These interviews were conducted with three distinct but complementary groups: autistic adults, parents of autistic children, and specialized professionals (educators, psychologists, speech therapists). Each group provided a unique perspective, enriching the diversity of viewpoints analyzed. For example, the testimonies of autistic individuals themselves offer a precious window into their subjective experiences, while the narratives of parents and professionals help contextualize these experiences within broader frameworks, such as family or institutional settings.

In addition to the interviews, participant observations were carried out in care centers and specialized schools for autistic individuals in Morocco. These observations documented daily interactions between autistic individuals and their interlocutors, focusing on gestures, facial expressions, silences, and other non-verbal signals that play a crucial role in communication. Although more immersive, this method required great ethical caution to avoid any intrusion into the participants' privacy. We ensured informed consent from all involved actors, clearly explaining the objectives of the research and guaranteeing the confidentiality of the collected data. This ethical approach is essential, as it reflects our commitment to treating participants not as mere objects of study, but as partners in the construction of knowledge.

The choice of sampling was also guided by a thorough reflection on representativeness and diversity of profiles. A sample of 30 participants was selected using purposive sampling, aiming to cover a variety of demographic and social characteristics. Inclusion criteria included direct knowledge of autism, whether through personal experience (for autistic individuals) or professional expertise (for educators and psychologists). This diversity allowed us to capture a wide range of perspectives while maintaining thematic coherence around issues of communication and empathy. However, we acknowledge that the relatively modest size of the sample limits the generalizability of the results, a point that will be discussed in greater detail in the section dedicated to the study's limitations.

Data analysis was conducted through an inductive approach, based on thematic analysis of interview transcripts and observation notes. This method involves identifying recurring and significant themes within the data without imposing a pre-existing framework. The emerging themes were then organized into broader categories, such as "challenges of empathic communication," "adaptation strategies," or "ethical implications." To strengthen the validity of the results, data triangulation was performed by cross-referencing information from interviews, observations, and secondary documents (institutional reports, academic articles). This approach helped validate the conclusions while minimizing the risks of interpretative bias.

Finally, it is important to emphasize that this methodology is not merely a set of technical procedures but also a deeply human endeavor. It is grounded in active listening, sincere curiosity, and absolute respect for the experiences and voices of the participants. Each interview, observation, and analysis was conducted with the goal of understanding, not judging; of connecting, not categorizing. Behind every piece of data, every quote, and every identified theme, there are human beings sharing their truths, struggles, and hopes. This human dimension lies at the heart of our approach, reminding us that scientific research, even in its methodological rigor, must always serve those it seeks to understand.

IV. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

The results of this research, derived from an in-depth analysis of the collected qualitative data, provide valuable insights into the complex dynamics of interpersonal communication with autistic individuals in Morocco. These findings go beyond a mere presentation of facts or statistical trends; they reveal deeply human realities rooted in the lived experiences of the participants while highlighting concrete pathways to improve empathic and sympathetic interactions. Through this section, we present the main emerging themes,

their analytical interpretation, and their relevance in addressing the study's objectives.

One of the most striking results concerns the nearly universal perception of empathy as a powerful tool for building trust with autistic individuals. Interviews conducted with participants show that empathy, when practiced authentically and benevolently, helps reduce relational barriers often perceived as insurmountable. For instance, a specialized educator working in a care center in Morocco shared a moving anecdote: "When I take the time to sit next to an autistic child, without trying to impose anything on them, simply being there, available and attentive, I see a gradual transformation in their behavior. They start looking at me, smiling, and sometimes even attempting to communicate." This observation illustrates how empathy, as a passive yet active presence, can create a safe space where autistic individuals feel confident enough to open up. This finding corroborates Rogers' (1957) work, which emphasizes the importance of empathic listening in therapeutic relationships, while demonstrating its applicability in non-clinical contexts.

However, the results also reveal that empathy alone is insufficient to ensure effective communication. Participants highlighted the challenges related to understanding non-verbal signals, which are often ambiguous or difficult to interpret in autistic individuals. A mother involved in the study explained: "My son never looks directly into my eyes, and this can be confusing for many people. But it's not because he doesn't feel anything; on the contrary, he expresses his emotions in his own way, through gestures or specific sounds." This observation underscores the importance of adapting our interpretation of social signals to the specificities of autistic individuals, avoiding the projection of our own cultural or normative expectations. Participant observations conducted in care centers confirmed this idea, showing that the most effective professionals were those capable of decoding these alternative signals and integrating them into their interactions.

Another emerging theme relates to the role of sympathy, perceived by participants as an active and intentional posture aimed at supporting the specific needs of autistic individuals. Unlike empathy, which relies more on silent listening and attentive presence, sympathy involves concrete actions to address the difficulties encountered. For example, a psychologist shared a strategy she frequently uses: "When an autistic child seems overwhelmed by a social situation, I offer them familiar objects, like a toy or a book, to help them calm down. It may seem simple, but it makes a big difference." This approach, which combines empathy and sympathy, illustrates how an ethical posture can be applied in practical situations. It also reflects Hoffman's (2000) conclusions, which emphasize that sympathy must be guided by a deep understanding of the other person's needs to be truly effective.

Finally, the results highlight the importance of cultural dimensions in communication with autistic individuals in Morocco. Participants often mentioned the central role of family and community in supporting autistic individuals, a characteristic specific to the Moroccan sociocultural context. A father explained: "In our culture, we say that an autistic child does not belong only to their parents but to the entire family. We share responsibilities, and this helps us overcome challenges." This collective perspective contrasts sharply with the individualistic approaches often favored in Western research, underscoring the need to adapt communication strategies to local realities. Participant observations also revealed that the most successful interactions were those involving close collaboration between family members, professionals, and autistic individuals themselves.

The analysis of these results allows us to draw several significant conclusions. First, it confirms that empathy and sympathy are complementary tools, each playing a specific role in communication with autistic individuals. Empathy creates a space of trust and understanding, while sympathy acts as a lever to address the immediate needs of those concerned. Second, it highlights the importance of adapting these postures to the cognitive and cultural specificities of autistic individuals, avoiding any universalist or standardized approach. Finally, it sheds light on the potential of collective and family-centered approaches to strengthen the social inclusion of autistic individuals in Morocco.

These findings, while enriching, must be interpreted with caution. They reflect the perceptions and experiences of the participants involved in this study and cannot be generalized to all autistic individuals in Morocco. Nevertheless, they offer concrete avenues to guide future practices, particularly in terms of professional training, societal awareness, and inclusive public policies. Behind every result presented here, there are human stories, moments of connection, and sincere efforts to build bridges between worlds sometimes perceived as distant. This human dimension lies at the heart of our research, reminding us that science, even in its methodological rigor, must always serve those it seeks to understand.

V. DISCUSSION

The following discussion focuses on interpreting the results obtained in this research, situating them within the framework of existing works while highlighting their original contributions. It also aims to explore the practical and ethical implications of these findings, while acknowledging their limitations. This critical reflection not only contextualizes the study's discoveries but also opens avenues for future research and concrete interventions.

The results of this study confirm that empathic and sympathetic postures play a central role in communication with autistic individuals in Morocco. Empathy, perceived as the ability to put oneself in another's shoes and understand their emotions without judgment, emerges as a sine qua non condition for building trust-based relationships. However, this observation should not overshadow the inherent complexity of its implementation. Participants frequently emphasized that empathy requires constant adaptation to the specificities of autistic individuals, particularly regarding non-verbal signals or alternative modes of expression. These insights align with Baron-Cohen's (2009) work, which highlights the cognitive challenges related to the theory of mind in autistic individuals, while enriching these perspectives with a cultural dimension

specific to the Moroccan context. Indeed, our study demonstrates that empathy cannot be reduced to a simple universal skill; it must be adapted to local sociocultural norms, where human interactions are deeply influenced by collective and familial values.

In parallel, sympathy emerges as a complementary—and even essential—posture for addressing the immediate needs of autistic individuals. Unlike empathy, which relies on passive listening and attentive presence, sympathy involves intentional action aimed at supporting others in their distress or difficulties. This distinction is crucial, as it reflects two distinct yet inseparable dimensions of ethical communication. For example, when professionals describe their strategies for calming an autistic child in a stressful situation, they often mention simple yet significant gestures, such as using familiar objects or creating a calm environment. These practices, though seemingly minor, demonstrate a deep understanding of the specific needs of autistic individuals and illustrate how sympathy can be mobilized in an ethical and effective manner. These findings corroborate Hoffman's (2000) conclusions, which emphasize the importance of an active emotional response to strengthen human relationships, while contextualizing them within the Moroccan framework, where family and community solidarity plays a predominant role.

Another major contribution of this research lies in its exploration of the cultural dimensions of communication with autistic individuals. Unlike Western studies, which often favor individualistic approaches centered on autonomy, our study highlights the importance of collective dynamics in the Moroccan context. Participants consistently emphasized the central role of family and community in supporting autistic individuals, a characteristic of societies marked by values of solidarity and mutual aid. This collective perspective offers an interesting alternative to Western models, showing that the social inclusion of autistic individuals cannot be considered solely through the lens of the individual but must also integrate familial and communal realities. These results call for a rethinking of public policies and professional practices to better account for these cultural specificities, while avoiding any form of essentialism or generalization.

Despite these significant advances, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of this study. First, the relatively modest size of the sample restricts the generalization of the results to all autistic individuals in Morocco. Although participants were selected according to rigorous criteria to ensure profile diversity, this approach cannot replace a larger-scale investigation. Second, the qualitative approach adopted in this research, while enriching, presents potential biases related to the subjectivity of both participants and researchers. These limitations underscore the need to continue investigations, combining qualitative and quantitative methods to validate and deepen the findings.

Finally, the implications of this research are multiple and merit further exploration. On a practical level, the results can serve as a foundation for developing training programs for professionals working with autistic individuals, emphasizing the importance of empathy, sympathy, and cultural adaptations. On a policy level, they call for greater consideration of local specificities in social and educational inclusion policies, to ensure genuine equal opportunities for autistic individuals. Finally, on an ethical level, this study reminds us that communication with autistic individuals must be guided by principles of respect, dignity, and autonomy, while taking into account their needs and aspirations.

Behind every result, every analysis, and every implication, there are human beings who aspire to be understood, respected, and integrated into a society that, too often, struggles to fully embrace them. This research is not merely an academic contribution; it is also a call to action, an advocacy for a more inclusive and empathetic society. For beyond concepts, theories, and data, it is lives that are at stake, and it is our collective responsibility to ensure that these lives are lived with dignity and fulfillment.

VI. CONCLUSION

The present research, focused on the role of empathic and sympathetic postures as ethical tools in interpersonal communication with autistic individuals in Morocco, has shed light on complex and deeply human dynamics. The findings reveal that empathy and sympathy are not merely abstract concepts or technical skills but powerful levers for transforming human interactions into genuine bridges of understanding and solidarity. When mobilized authentically and adaptably, these postures create spaces of trust where autistic individuals can express themselves, connect, and thrive. However, this study also highlights that their implementation requires particular attention to the cognitive, emotional, and cultural specificities of the individuals concerned, as well as a deep reflection on the ethical implications of these practices.

One of the main contributions of this research lies in its ability to contextualize the dynamics of communication with autistic individuals within a specific Moroccan framework. Unlike the universalist approaches often favored in international literature, this study underscores the importance of local sociocultural norms in the perception and management of autism. Participants consistently emphasized the central role of family and community in supporting autistic individuals, a characteristic of collective societies like Morocco. This collective perspective offers an interesting alternative to Western models, which tend to prioritize individual autonomy. It reminds us that the social inclusion of autistic individuals cannot be viewed solely through the lens of the individual but must also integrate familial and communal realities. This contribution not only enriches academic debates but also provides concrete avenues for rethinking public policies and professional practices in this field.

From a methodological standpoint, this research adopts a rigorous qualitative approach, capturing the richness and complexity of the participants' lived experiences. Semi-structured interviews, participant observations, and thematic data analysis allowed for the documentation of realities often overlooked in quantitative studies. These methods revealed nuanced aspects of communication with autistic individuals, such as the importance of alternative non-verbal signals, the

role of familiar objects in emotion regulation, and the influence of family dynamics on social interactions. While this qualitative approach has certain limitations, particularly in terms of result generalization, it offers a depth of analysis that often eludes quantitative methods. This methodological approach reflects our commitment to treating participants not as mere objects of study but as active partners in the construction of knowledge.

The implications of this research are multiple and merit further exploration. On a practical level, the results can serve as a foundation for developing training programs for professionals working with autistic individuals, emphasizing the importance of empathy, sympathy, and cultural adaptations. For instance, educators, psychologists, and speech therapists could benefit from specific training on decoding alternative non-verbal signals or employing sympathetic strategies to address the immediate needs of autistic individuals. On a policy level, this study calls for greater consideration of local specificities in social and educational inclusion policies, ensuring genuine equal opportunities for autistic individuals. Finally, on an ethical level, this research reminds us that communication with autistic individuals must be guided by principles of respect, dignity, and autonomy, while taking into account their needs and aspirations.

Finally, it is important to recognize that this research is not an endpoint but a starting point for new explorations. The findings raise questions that warrant further investigation, particularly through comparative studies across different cultural contexts or longitudinal research to observe the evolution of practices over time. Additionally, it would be relevant to explore other dimensions of communication with autistic individuals, such as the impact of digital technologies or the role of media in raising societal awareness. These research perspectives offer exciting opportunities to deepen our understanding of relational dynamics and contribute to a more inclusive and empathetic society.

Behind every word, sentence, and conclusion of this research are human beings who aspire to be heard, understood, and respected. This study is not merely an academic contribution; it is also a call to action, an advocacy for a society where every individual, regardless of their differences, finds their place. For beyond concepts, theories, and data, it is lives that are at stake, and it is our collective responsibility to ensure that these lives are lived with dignity and fulfillment. This research, though imperfect, testifies to our commitment to building a world where empathy and sympathy are not mere ideals but concrete practices serving humanity.

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