

# Conversations on Empathy

In the aftermath of a global pandemic, amidst new and ongoing wars, genocide, inequality, and staggering ecological collapse, some in the public and political arenas have argued that we are in desperate need of greater empathy – be this with our neighbours, refugees, war victims, the vulnerable, or disappearing animal and plant species. This interdisciplinary volume asks the crucial questions: How does a better understanding of empathy contribute, if at all, to our understanding of others? How is it implicated in the ways we perceive, understand and constitute others as subjects? *Conversations on Empathy* examines how empathy might be enacted and experienced – either as a way to highlight forms of otherness or, instead, to overcome what might otherwise appear to be irreducible differences. It explores the ways in which empathy enables us to understand, imagine, and create sameness and otherness in our everyday intersubjective encounters focusing on a varied range of “radical others” – others who are perceived as being dramatically different from oneself. With a focus on the importance of empathy to understand difference, the book contends that the role of empathy is critical – now more than ever – for thinking about local and global challenges of interconnectedness, care and justice.

**Francesca Mezzenzana** is Principal Investigator/Senior Researcher at the Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich (LMU), Germany.

**Daniela Peluso** is Emeritus Fellow in Social Anthropology at the University of Kent, UK.



# Conversations on Empathy

Interdisciplinary Perspectives on  
Imagination and Radical Othering

Edited by Francesca Mezzenzana  
and Daniela Peluso



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# Contents

<i>List of contributors</i>	viii
<i>Foreword: Empathy redux</i>	x
MURRAY SMITH	
<b>Introduction: Conversations on Empathy – Interdisciplinary perspectives on empathy, imagination and othering</b>	<b>1</b>
FRANCESCA MEZZENZANA AND DANIELA PELUSO	
<b>PART I</b>	
<b>Framing empathy and otherness: interdisciplinary perspectives</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>1 Empathy and its limits: a manifesto</b>	<b>27</b>
C. JASON THROOP	
<b>2 Being open and looking on: fluctuations in everyday life and Psychology</b>	<b>34</b>
VASUDEVI REDDY	
<b>3 A psychological exploration of empathy</b>	<b>60</b>
HEATHER J. FERGUSON AND LENA WIMMER	
<b>4 Autism and the ‘double empathy problem’</b>	<b>78</b>
DAMIAN E. M. MILTON, KRYSIA EMILY WALDOCK, AND NATHAN KEATES	

**PART II**

**Imagining others: human interactions** 99

**5 Dynamics and vicissitudes of empathy** 101

DOUGLAS HOLLAN

**6 Should we be against empathy?: engagement with antiheroes in fiction and the theoretical implications for empathy's role in morality** 116

MARGRETHE BRUUN VAAGE

**7 Cultivating an empathic impulse in wartime Ukraine** 135

CATHERINE WANNER AND VALENTYNA PAVLENKO

**8 Capital empathy, and the inequality of the radical other** 154

ROBIN TRUTH GOODMAN

**9 Situating empathy: Holocaust education for the Middle East/Muslim minority in Germany** 174

ESRA ÖZYÜREK

**PART III**

**Imagining others: encounters beyond the human** 195

**10 Just like humans: similarity, difference and empathy towards nonhumans in the Amazonian rainforest** 197

FRANCESCA MEZZENZANA

**11 Un-tabooing empathy: the benefits of empathic science with nonhuman research participants** 216

CHRISTINE WEBB, BECCA FRANKS, MONICA GAGLIANO  
AND BARBARA SMUTS

**12 *Augenblick* and the 'rush' of extraordinary encounters: empathy and sociality with non-human radical others in Amazonia** 235

DANIELA PELUSO

<b>13 Implications of children’s social, emotional, and relational interactions with robots for human–robot empathy</b>	<b>256</b>
JACQUELINE M. KORY-WESTLUND	
<b>Afterword: empathy’s entanglements</b>	<b>279</b>
CAROLYN PEDWELL	
<i>Index</i>	<b>292</b>

# Contributors

**Heather J. Ferguson** is Professor in Psychology at the University of Kent, UK.

**Becca Franks** is Assistant Professor in the Department of Environmental Studies at New York University.

**Monica Gagliano** is Research Associate Professor of Evolutionary Ecology at Southern Cross University and Director of the Biological Intelligence Lab funded by the Templeton World Charity Foundation.

**Robin Truth Goodman** is Professor of English at Florida State University.

**Douglas Hollan** is Professor of Anthropology and Luckman Distinguished Teacher at University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), and a practicing psychoanalyst.

**Nathan Keates** is a PhD candidate at the University of Kent, where he is also Lecturer in Intellectual and Disabilities at the Tizard Center.

**Jacqueline M. Kory-Westlund** is an independent scholar with the Ronin Institute, writer, and artist, and holds a PhD in robotics from the MIT Media Lab.

**Francesca Mezzenzana** is Principal Investigator/Senior Researcher at the Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich (LMU), Germany.

**Damian E. M. Milton** is Senior Lecturer in Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities at the Tizard Centre, University of Kent, teaches on the MA Education (Autism) programme at London South Bank University, and chairs the Participatory Autism Research Collective (PARC).

**Esra Özyürek** is the Sultan Qaboos Professor of Abrahamic Faiths and Shared Values and the Academic Director of Cambridge Interfaith Programme at the Faculty of Divinity, University of Cambridge, UK.

**Valentyna Pavlenko** is Professor of Applied Psychology at the V.N. Karazin Kharkiv National University, Ukraine.



**Carolyn Pedwell** is Professor in Cultural Studies and Media at the University of Kent, UK.

**Daniela Peluso** is an Emeritus Fellow in Social Anthropology at the University of Kent, UK.

**Vasudevi Reddy** is Emeritus Professor of Developmental and Cultural Psychology at the University of Portsmouth, UK.

**Murray Smith** is Professor of Philosophy, Art, and Film, and Director of the Aesthetics Research Centre, at the University of Kent, UK.

**Barbara Smuts** is Professor Emerita of Psychology, University of Michigan.

**C. Jason Throop** is Professor and Chair at the Department of Anthropology, UCLA.

**Margrethe Bruun Vaage** is Senior Lecturer in Film and Media at the University of Kent, UK.

**Kryisia Emily Waldock** is a PhD candidate at the University of Kent, where she is also a research assistant at the Institute for Cyber Security in Society.

**Catherine Wanner** is Professor of History, Anthropology, and Religious Studies at The Pennsylvania State University.

**Christine Webb** is Lecturer and Postdoctoral Fellow in the Department of Human Evolutionary Biology at Harvard University, and she studies primate social behaviour, cognition, and emotion.

**Lena Wimmer** is Postdoctoral Research Associate at the University of Freiburg, Germany.

# Foreword

## Empathy redux

*Murray Smith*

For a concept that is only 150 years old, empathy has certainly had its ups and downs. Not so long ago, empathy was widely regarded as the engine of intersubjectivity and the seat of morality, the capacity to “feel with” (from the German *Einfühlung*, “in-feeling”) being regarded as a crucial component in both understanding others and responding morally to them. Many still take this view, although there has been a wave of scepticism directed at empathy – a critical reassessment of the concept, the phenomenon that it describes, and the claims made for them. But they say that what doesn’t kill you, makes you stronger. And so I shall argue it is with empathy: once we take the critique of empathy into account, we will find that the idea that remains is more precise, better understood, and of no less significance in our quest to understand human social interaction.

One way to mark out empathy as a special process, and a distinctive state of mind, is through the contrast with *sympathy*. If we understand sympathy as a state of “feeling *for*” another agent or group of agents – as I might feel pity for your suffering without “mirroring” the suffering you experience – then we can see that empathy, with its emphasis on reduplicating or “feeling *with*” another subject, picks out a related, but distinct, phenomenon. (Note also that, though we are accustomed to thinking of empathy as a human phenomenon, there is plenty of evidence that (at least) mammals more generally relate to one another empathically (Rowlands 2008, pp. 64–7); I turn to the possibility of empathy between humans and non-human animals later on in this foreword.) To sharpen and consolidate the contrast between sympathy and empathy, consider a scenario in which I see that you have been insulted but you haven’t detected the jibe: I feel aggrieved on your behalf, but our occurrent states of mind are not at all aligned – you continue to smile obliviously, while I am unsettled.

Films and novels continuously work with such misalignments to create *dramatic irony* – situations in which we understand the significance of what is unfolding in a way that one or more of the dramatis personae do not. But empathy – feeling with characters – is also a significant ingredient in the narrative arts, where we are invited to attune ourselves to and imagine the misery and elation, envy and pride, and a thousand other emotions of the imaginary agents whose fortunes we follow. Sympathy and empathy

together create a mosaic of responses, carefully engineered in the context of art to intensify our responses, not simply replicating but building on and expanding the interplay of sympathy and empathy as it occurs in real life (Smith 2017 and 2022b).

As the volume in your hands amply demonstrates, empathy is a complex phenomenon which can be explored from many angles – physiological, neurological, psychological, anthropological, interpersonal, social, moral, and political. The simple act of reading that list will be enough to signal how difficult it is to disentangle these different perspectives; so Francesca Mezzenzana and Daniela Peluso, and their crack team of contributors, have wisely pursued their dialogue on empathy under the banner of interdisciplinarity (albeit with an emphasis on the distinctive contribution that anthropologists bring to the conversation) with a focus on radical otherness and the imagination. Nonetheless, we can sketch some of the basics of the contemporary understanding of empathy – all of it subject to revision and even rejection, but at a minimum, useful as a starting point.

When we find ourselves empathising with others, the journey to that destination might have begun in either of two distinct ways. On the one hand, we might have taken the high road to empathy, via a conscious act of imagining “what it is like” to be another person – perhaps someone radically different – in some specific situation. (Or, still more radically, as we will see, the target of our empathy might be some other non-human agent, biological or artificial, that we take to be sentient.) Such imagining is an extension of personal imagining, in which I model myself in alternative (past, future, actual, possible) situations. With empathic imagining, I switch out my traits and occurrent states for those of the empathic target: if I want to mirror *your* state of mind when you are made redundant, I will not get far unless I build into my imaginative model whatever I know about you and your history and your preferences and your temperament. This account of empathy has been extensively explored within *simulation theory*, where (at least at the outset of the debate) simulating the states of others, as a means of understanding them, was contrasted with “theorising” them – understanding others through an implicit “theory of mind” (Coplan and Goldie 2011; Goldman 2013; Maibom 2020).

On the other hand, our journey might have started on the low road to empathy. Alongside such high-level mental capacities as imagination and reasoning, human beings possess a multitude of lower-level, non-conscious, instinctive capacities through which they glean information about the physical and social environments they navigate. The startle response is a good example: we don’t set out to be startled – except perhaps in the special context of horror films; rather, we just find ourselves startled (typically by a loud, sudden, and unexpected sound). The startle response is not empathic in character, since it is a response to something in the physical environment rather than another agent. But we certainly possess low-level capacities whose purpose is to track the states of those around us – most significantly, emotional contagion, and motor and affective mimicry. These mechanisms are similar, but not quite identical: emotional contagion describes the

phenomenon whereby we “catch” the emotions of others with no awareness of the source of the emotion – a kind of social osmosis; while motor and affective mimicry occur when – via an act of attending to the movements and emotions of others – we find ourselves mimicking those very movements and states.

Neuroscience has played a particularly significant role with respect to the low road, via the discovery of “mirror neurons”, neural subsystems dedicated to interpersonal attunement. Vittorio Gallese, with his various co-authors, argues that such “embodied simulation” operates in relation to movements, sensations, and emotions: we “feel into” the motor activity, bodily sense impressions, and the affective states of others (Freedberg and Gallese 2007, p. 197; Gallese and Guerra 2019). Gallese’s embrace of the term “simulation”, though, steers us towards another important point: the low road and the high road don’t merely run in parallel, but intersect with one another. An episode of empathy beginning as a conscious act of high-level, imaginative simulation might give rise to motor and affective mimicry, which in turn scaffold the act of simulation and create a feedback loop between imagination and affective mimicry and contagion. Or the process might begin through non-conscious contagion – the “groundfloor” of empathy – evolving into awareness, the development from an initially rudimentary feeling into a more elaborate and self-conscious act of imagining.

The passage “inwards” towards the brain structures underpinning empathy has taught us much. But that movement needs to be matched by another in the opposite direction: outwards. Humans are profoundly social creatures, and on the hypothesis being explored in this book, empathy is integral to that sociality (Mezzenzana and Peluso, this volume). We will not arrive at a robust and comprehensive account of empathy if we restrict our focus to the mind of the individual empathiser, even with the new tools of neuroscience. Rather, we need to complement such a focus with a complementary investigation of empathy as it is extended through human social interaction – and no discipline is better suited to that investigation than anthropology, as we can see from the volume you are now reading. The phenomenon of empathy can be further illuminated by joining this anthropological emphasis with the “extended mind” thesis, which stresses the way human capacities – empathy included – are augmented by our exploitation of both the physical and social environment. For what else is culture if not an extension – and of course, through that extension, a shaping – of the human mind? If the capacity for empathy is a basic feature of typical human development, it can be cultivated, in different ways and to different degrees, in different cultures and contexts. Through the products of culture – from oral storytelling and performed drama to the novel, film, television, and the myriad other modern vehicles of narrative – empathy is channelled, refined, and expanded (Smith 2020, chapter 7).

Famously, however, German playwright Bertolt Brecht had severe doubts about the role of empathy in our experience of dramatic works (and given

the German origins and lineage of the concept, it is not so surprising that one of the first sustained critiques of it came from the German intellectual milieu). One of Brecht's concerns was that the structure of much traditional drama created a potent empathic bond with the hero of the work – an aesthetically powerful, but ethically and politically damaging response, locking us into the interests and perspective of the protagonist while obscuring those of the other agents involved, and impeding our understanding of the situation itself. Brecht devised and advocated for a variety of narrative and stylistic strategies, or *Verfremdungseffekte*, to break up the empathic “tunnel vision” he saw at the heart of traditional drama. These included stylised and self-conscious acting, pulling performer and character apart; and episodic narrative form, through which the story moves in sometimes disorienting “leaps and curves” across time and between characters (Brecht 1964). All of this is in contrast to a style which aims to make us see the actor as the embodiment of the protagonist, and for us to become empathically absorbed into and moved by that character's story.

Although articulated decades before and in the very different context of debate among practitioners and theorists concerning the politics of art, Brecht's critical perspective on empathy prefigures the contemporary philosophical critique in several ways. Two kinds of concern have been raised, bearing on the role of empathy in understanding others, and in our moral orientation towards them. Consider first the question of understanding. Let's return to the imagined scenario described previously, where I perceive that you have been insulted but you have not noticed the slight. If I seek to empathise with you – seek to mirror your occurrent state of mind – I can “imagine from the inside” your focussed happiness, but already we can see a limitation here: on its own, that act of empathising fails to capture something important in your situation.

Now imagine that you receive a phone call; I cannot hear what the caller says, but your mood palpably changes. You frown, your shoulders slump, you vocalise distress. Those low-level empathic scaffolders then do their work: through affective mimicry and emotional contagion, I immediately detect your change of state – and it is not just a “cold”, intellectual recognition of a new emotion; rather, like a mild electric shock, I feel your anguish run through me. But what exactly do I understand at this moment? That you have learned unexpected and troubling news, the impact of which I register through embodied empathy. But what kind of news, and quite what kind of negative emotional state is this? Regret? Alarm? Grief? It is true that many emotions have distinctive expressive profiles, so we can figure out quite a lot just from facial, vocal, and postural cues. But no emotion can be fully understood unless we know its object – the thing to which the emotion is a response. So if I am to understand you properly, I will need more than the affective charge and valence of your felt state; I will need to learn about what has happened, and that knowledge will most likely come through conversational testimony, not through empathy. We can begin to see that, no matter

how potent an empathic feeling, empathy in isolation provides a limited picture of the state and situation of another person (Turvey 2020; Smith 2022a).

What of the role of empathy in morality? On one orthodox picture, our empathic sensitivity to others underwrites our moral commitment to them. Through empathy, we register what those around us experience as harmful or benign; we enter into their perspective(s) on the world, with their interests in mind; we are drawn away from a narrowly self-oriented experience of the world. Sceptics of empathy, however, are unimpressed by this view of empathy, noting that it tends to be biased towards those we know, are attached to, find attractive, and/or directly encounter, tilting our judgements towards those (literally and figuratively) close to us and away from the plight of those remote from us (Prinz 2011). Empathy might even be still more actively damaging, undermining our moral self-trust (Berninger 2021), and disorienting our moral compasses (Vaage, this volume). For this reason, empathy does not, in the words of Paul Bloom, “scale up” politically (Bloom 2014). Moreover, while an ability to feel the feelings of others may be an important ingredient in a benevolent and ethical perspective on the world, in many contexts empathy alone is helpful neither to the target of the empathy nor to the empathiser. If you encounter someone suffering acutely, merely mirroring their pain serves neither you nor the sufferer, to the extent that the pain inhibits your ability to help them. As one patient describes her experience with a doctor: “His calmness didn't make me feel abandoned, it made me feel secure . . . I needed to look at him and see the opposite of my fear, not its echo” (Jamison 2014, quoted in Bloom 2014). On this view, rather than empathy, what we should prize is *compassion*, conceived (in the terms set out here) as a sympathetic concern or “feeling for” the well-being of others, combined with “intelligence, self-control, and a sense of justice”. We should think of empathy, Bloom suggests, rather as we look upon anger: as a part of our evolved psychology that plays a crucial moral role but which can be dysfunctional and needs to be rationally constrained and steered (Bloom 2014 and 2016).

Nothing in this critique, however, rules out the reality of empathy, nor of its importance to our understanding of and moral stance towards others; it is just that our conception of the nature and role of empathy needs to be revised. Granted, there are contexts in which empathy may need to be held at bay. But in other contexts, it may be essential. Berys Gaut considers the case of policy making, where those formulating a policy – say, transporting refugees arriving in the UK to Rwanda on a one-way ticket – or assessing an existing policy, need to consider not only the “external” facts of the situation, but the psychology of those (in this example, the refugees) subject to the policy, if the policy is to be morally and politically justified. Or more particularly still, what is necessary is a felt grasp of the refugees’ experience of the effects of the policy, the “what it is like” to be a certain kind of person in a certain kind of situation; what is required is “imaginative acquaintance” with the situation of the refugee. And that is a matter of, as Gaut terms it, “affective imagination” – of imaginatively simulating the refugee’s experience; in the terms



I use here, a matter of conscious empathic imagining (Gaut 2007, chapter 7; Smith 2022b). It is often observed that the wealthy and privileged don't know what it feels like to live in poverty and with injustice; empathic imagining can help to bridge that epistemic gap. On this picture, then, empathy may not be sufficient for understanding or moral judgement, nor necessary in all situations; but it is necessary in many contexts, and valuable even if not necessary in a great many more (see Ferran 2021 and Werner and Lüdtke 2021 for parallel discussions of the role of empathy in understanding and appreciating literature). Empathy may not be the whole story, but it may yet be one of the protagonists in the story of human interaction.

Moreover, empathy plays a particularly important role in this way as a bridge to otherness – sometimes radical otherness, as the present volume demonstrates: whether to human agents in cultures or situations remote from our own (such as the antiheroes discussed by Vaage, this volume), or non-human animal agents: consider the cultural belief among the Runa and the Ese Eja in the possibility of empathy with the non-human animals sharing their habitat (explored by Mezzenzana, this volume, and Peluso, this volume, respectively). Consider here, too, the example of Temple Grandin, Professor of Animal Science at Colorado State University, whose autism appears to give her a special – empathic – insight into the experience of the farm animals whose lives she researches, and for whose welfare she advocates (as explored by Errol Morris in *First Person: Stairway to Heaven*, 2001); and Pippa Ehrlich and James Reed's *My Octopus Teacher* (2020), which documents the remarkably intimate interaction between a human diver and an octopus – a relationship stretching towards empathy. Andrea Arnold's *Cow* (2021) similarly attempts, in part, to immerse us in the *Umwelt* of a dairy cow.

“What is it like to be a bat?”, Thomas Nagel famously asked; we cannot know in principle, he answered (Nagel 1979). Werner Herzog's *Grizzly Man* (2005) articulates a parallel scepticism about human access to the inner lives of wild Alaskan bears, in dialectical opposition to the naïvete of bear-lover Timothy Treadwell, quite literally consumed by his overly-optimistic beliefs concerning his ability to understand and co-exist with these predators. And yet the other examples adduced here shed doubt on Nagel's conclusion. Humans interact with members of other species pervasively, as pets and domesticated farm animals and wild creatures, as they have done for millennia. *Sweetgrass* (2009), a film depicting the last sheep drive into the mountains for summer pasture by one family in Montana, is (in the words of one its makers, Lucien Castaing-Taylor) “as much about the sheep as about their herders” (Castaing-Taylor 2009), meticulously observing the interaction between the cowboy herders and their band of sheep. “The humans and animals that populate [the film] commingle and crisscross in ways that have taken us by surprise”, Taylor goes on. The gap between human and non-human psycho-physiologies should of course make us wary of assuming that humans can empathise with non-human animals (and vice versa) in just the same way as with other humans; on the other hand, however, we should not lose sight of the continuity of species –

central to a Darwinian understanding of the world – and overstate the barriers to interspecies understanding. Empathy is always partial and selective, even in the context of human-to-human interaction, rather than a complete “mind-meld” in which the empathiser becomes entirely immersed in the states of the empathic target and loses all awareness of their own identity (Smith 1997, p. 414; 2022b, p. 99). If we return to the basic idea of empathy as a process of mutual attunement by agents perceiving and interacting with one another, then it becomes evident that there is still much to be learned about the human–non-human animal case (Czatkowska 2022).

Moving in a different direction of engagement with radical otherness, there is the experience of empathy with the increasingly sophisticated artificial agents that we now routinely interact with (examined by Kory-Westlund, this volume) – a possibility that underlines the difference between empathy as a process (the effort to simulate or “feel into” the mind of another agent) and empathy as an outcome (which might be more or less accurate – we can aim at and have the impression that we experience empathy even in contexts where it is difficult, or perhaps impossible, to achieve empathy). In the science fiction film *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982), the capacity for empathy is used as a test to distinguish humans from android “replicants” – an unreliable test, it turns out, since some the replicants possess this capacity, and a good number of the human figures in the story appear to lack it. As viewers, we in turn are invited to sympathise and empathise with the replicants. We might wonder if empathy with an android is even possible; but if we think we can empathise with fictional characters – artefacts which mimic human individuals in certain respects, just like androids – as we seem to, perhaps we shouldn’t be too hasty in denying this possibility.

Finally, it is also worth noting, in this context, that the earliest theories of empathy took the target of *Einfühlung* to be *objects* rather than agents – our ability to “in-feel” the structural forces in, for example, the arch of a building or a geometrical design (Currie 2011; Romand 2020). All in all, empathy has the potential to attenuate alterity across a wide and expansive array of domains and agents, affording us an especially direct connection with the feelings and inner dynamics of objects and actors – natural and artificial, familiar and far-flung – beyond the boundary of the self. Let the conversations on empathy commence.

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# Introduction

## Conversations on Empathy – Interdisciplinary perspectives on empathy, imagination and othering

*Francesca Mezzenzana and Daniela Peluso*

We are living in challenging times. In the aftermath of a global pandemic, amidst new and ongoing wars, genocide, inequality, and staggering ecological collapse, one can feel pessimistic and hopeless, and rightly so, as such events seem to become increasingly normalised. In the public and political arenas, many have argued that we are in desperate need of greater empathy – be this with our neighbours, refugees, war victims, the vulnerable, or disappearing animal and plant species. Perhaps nowhere have these calls for empathy been more visible than in former US President Barack Obama’s warning that the United States is undergoing an “empathy deficit” which needs to be urgently solved. In Obama’s address to the 2006 graduating class at Northwestern University, he beseeched to his young audience:

There’s a lot of talk in this country about the federal deficit. But I think we should talk more about our empathy deficit – the ability to put ourselves in someone else’s shoes; to see the world through those who are different from us – the child who’s hungry, the laid-off steelworker, the immigrant woman cleaning your dorm room.

(Obama as cited in Northwestern Online News 2006)

As elsewhere in the public domain, empathy is evoked here as the solution to a society fraught with divisions and inequality. As noted by feminist scholar Carolyn Pedwell, such calls often revolve around the “refrain of how to cultivate empathy” (2016, p. 3, Pedwell this volume) rather than on the more basic and contentious questions of what exactly empathy is and what it can and cannot do. What is left out from such public debates are discussions about what empathy’s cognitive, experiential, and political facets are. How, if at all, can a better understanding of empathy help us face the social, economic, and political challenges that lie ahead? Is greater empathy what we really need at this point in time of planetary crisis?

These questions have been asked, in different ways, by a multitude of scholars in the field of empathy. After all, there is a reason why empathy has entered the political toolkit: Since its inception, the concept of empathy

has been linked to prosocial and moral behaviour (Maibom 2017; Eisenberg 2000). In particular, empathy is broadly understood to induce a greater knowledge about the other, and to encourage prosocial behaviour such as helping, comforting, and cooperating (Eisenberg and Strayer 1987; Stueber 2006). Another common assumption within public debates is that empathy can help us to overcome radical difference and the radical othering of any such differences. By virtue of empathic engagements, we can come to feel what it is like to be the other, no matter how radically different this other is constructed to be, which in turn should translate into greater care and concern. It is then no wonder that during a time of conflict, pressing societal and environmental concerns, and staggering inequality, empathy has made a powerful entrance in public discourses as if it were a quasi-magical recipe formulated to solve issues of injustice and ongoing crises.

This rather simplistic view of empathy which proliferates in the public realm has already been widely criticised by numerous scholars. Many have highlighted the “dark” side of empathy (Breithaupt 2019), showing how empathetic perspective-taking can be used for manipulation, aggression, and warfare (Bubandt and Willerslev 2015). Other scholars have launched a harsh critique of empathy as a pathway to morality, arguing that empathy is parochial and that individuals are often biased towards those who are more similar to themselves (Bloom 2016; Prinz 2011). Some scholars also outright question the link between empathy and moral functioning (Maibom 2010), while others stress that empathy is a morally neutral faculty (Throop and Zahavi 2020, see also Throop this volume). Despite these critiques, empathy remains firmly associated with two claims. First, empathy is seen as being involved with accessing others’ perspectives, and second, empathy seems to play some role in responding to others in an ethical way (Coplan and Goldie 2011). No matter how imperfect and inaccurate empathy might be, it continues to be perceived as providing a bridge toward others.

The contributions in this volume focus precisely on this constitutive aspect of empathy: its relation to otherness. A central concern of this volume is to explore how through empathetic encounters, the other, and the self are mutually constituted. In particular, we are interested in how ontological categories of “otherness” are made and undone in everyday processes of empathising. Furthermore, within such dynamic constructions, we are also attuned to how radical otherness emerges. Taking encounters with otherness as a guiding theme throughout the volume, the contributions address the following principal questions from a variety of theoretical perspectives: What is the relationship between otherness and empathy? How do we recognise others as “different” and yet similar to us? What are the limits of empathy for knowing others? How might empathy as imaginative perspective-taking shape or create the “other” as a radical other? How do culturally specific forms of empathy favour or delegitimise others? How do social, political, and cultural constructions of radical otherness affect manifestations of empathy?

Our contributors tackle these questions in multiple ways. A theme that runs through some of the contributions is the examination of how culturally specific understandings of otherness and similarity shape expressions of empathy. For instance, in a Euro-American context whereby humans and plants are understood to be ontologically different, empathy towards plant forms is generally viewed as an inaccurate anthropocentric projection (Marder 2012), whereas empathy is possible – if not commonplace – in other epistemological regimes where one is socialised to view some plants as beings who are subjects (see Kohn 2013). On the one hand, it then seems that pre-existing notions about the ontology of beings – to which we are socialised as children – inform the way in which higher forms of empathy are manifested. For example, culturally specific views of who or what constitutes an “other” – ranging from who is considered marriageable to a different nation state – deeply influence the expression of empathy. On the other hand, however, it is clear that self and other are not static distinctions, and their boundaries can shift and potentially collapse with unpredictable consequences. First-hand empathetic encounters in which the self and other come into contact – forms of low-level or “basic” empathy (Stueber 2006) – can thus throw into disarray ideas about what others “ought” to be (see the contributions by Peluso, Webb et al., and Kory-Westlund this volume) and re-arrange the self/other distinction. Thus, while empathetic encounters are invariably shaped by local notions of what the other is, there is also the potential – during direct encounters with others – for these pre-existing notions to vacillate and be turned upside-down. Here, we are interested in elucidating ethnographically and phenomenologically how differences and similarities emerge from within empathetic encounters with a wide variety of others.

This collection of essays also examines the ways in which empathy enables us to understand, imagine, and create otherness, particularly in instances when the other may not be directly perceivable and indeed radically different from one’s self, such as in the case of a fictional character, an animal, or a robot. Our volume focuses on a varied range of “radical others” – others who are perceived by the perceiver as being dramatically different from themselves – as a means to show how empathy might be enacted and experienced either as a way to highlight forms of otherness or, instead, to overcome what might otherwise appear to be irreducible differences. With “radical otherness”, we refer to a category of otherness that is not “naturally given” but rather socially, politically, and culturally constructed through everyday practices and discourses in which empathy can play a crucial part. We recognise that for any perception of others, there is always an “I” whose specific positionality and power needs to be acknowledged. While at a micro-level, self/other dynamics entailed in empathetic processes are universal, wider processes of making someone “other” are deeply imbricated with issues of power, privilege, race, and gender. We thus view radical otherness as a space that allows for the “co-emergence of

subjects in relation” to each other (Isherwood and Harris 2014, p. viii) that is both existentially and politically charged (see also Pedwell, this volume). What the contributions clearly emphasise is that radical otherness is not a static category but one which often fluctuates, even within the same setting.

Another theme which resurfaces throughout the volume is how the faculty of empathy itself can be used as a tool to create and sustain difference. For instance, Damian E. M. Milton, Krysia Emily Waldock, and Nathan Keates’ contribution provocatively suggests that in the case of autism, often described in the literature as a condition which impairs empathetic expression, medical and scholarly discourses about empathy function as effective tools that ironically transform autistic people into “others” on the basis of non-autistic persons’ perspectives. Their poignant critique of non-autistic scholars’ concepts of empathy powerfully highlights how empathy itself is a concept that presupposes specific understandings of the mind, of the self, and of relations with others. Thus, empathy can be used as an apparatus for marking a difference between self and others, us and them. Similarly, Esra Özyürek’s ethnographic chapter describes how white Germans tend to consider Muslim fellow citizens as unable to properly empathise with the tragedy of the Holocaust. Together, our contributors show how far from being a self-evident neutral capacity, empathy is itself variably based on specific cultural assumptions. Thus, the questions of what empathy is, who is capable of empathising, and whether there is a proper way to empathise are not merely theoretical questions but highly political ones. As Carolyn Pedwell (this volume) cogently points out, the concepts of empathy and sympathy have an important colonial legacy. This volume – with its interdisciplinary outlook, multiple contexts, and broad range of self and others – hopes to shed light on the epistemological, ontological, and political underpinnings of empathy, and on its intrinsic relationship with otherness.

It is significant to emphasise that our contributors do not have a unified perspective on the meaning of empathy. This is not only a reflection of their diverse interdisciplinary fields and distinctive intellectual trajectories – psychology, child development, film theory, gender studies, artificial intelligence, autism studies, comparative literature, cultural studies, ethology, and anthropology – but also because a single definition of empathy might not be warranted. Many of our contributors acknowledge that it might be difficult – if not impossible ethnographically – to isolate empathy from other “empathy-like processes” such as pity, compassion, and sympathy (Hollan and Throop 2008; Pedwell this volume). Thus, contributors in this volume draw on their unique disciplinary backgrounds and research to think about empathy and otherness, considering other cognitive processes such as mind reading (Goldman 2006), imitation (Decety and Meltzoff 2011; Gallese 2001), emotional states (Goldie 2000; Stein 1989), and imagination (Gaesser 2013; Smith 2017, 2022). In the following two sections, we introduce the reader to some of the concepts that guide this volume. First, we offer an introduction on the idea of otherness and imagination and its relevance to



empathy. Second, we explore the politics of otherness and examine how empathy might be imbricated in processes of empathy. Finally, we sketch a summary of our contributors' chapters.

## On otherness and imagination

Otherness and the imagination are intrinsic to any debate on empathy. Consider, for instance, how the category of "other" appears no matter how one decides to define empathy. Whether one thinks of empathy as involving a feeling for an other or imagining what is like to be in another person's shoes, or simply making inferences about another's mental state, one can see that, as a basic intersubjective phenomenon, empathy rests on the dynamic relationship between self and other. As Murray Smith (2017, p. 178) describes, "empathy is a kind of imagining; in particular it is a type of personal or central imagining". And while it might be impossible to come to a unified understanding of what empathy is, it seems clear that, unlike phenomena like emotional contagion, it rests upon a "clear self-other differentiation" (Coplan 2011, p. 5). In other words, as Throop and Zahavi, have phrased it, empathy is about "being experientially acquainted with an experience that is not my own" (2020, p. 289).

The way one chooses to define empathy (and our contributors do so distinctively) has repercussions on how an "other" becomes conceptualised. Let us consider, for instance, Theodore Lipps' (1909) original definition of empathy as *Einfühlung* (feeling into). Lipps described empathy as a form of mimetic projection whereby the empathiser projects his own emotional states onto someone else. *Einfühlung* is based on a form of inner imitation whereby the perceiver imitates or replicates the movements and states of the perceived subject. As Dan Zahavi astutely notes:

One implication of Lipps's model is that there are rather strict limitations to what I can come to understand empathically of the other. The imitated expression can only evoke an affective state in myself that resembles the affective state of the other if I myself have had the affective state in question in the past.

(2014a, pp. 130–131)

Such a conceptualisation of empathy has two consequences. First, it assumes that other minds are, in principle, private and inaccessible. Second, it posits the other as intelligible only in so far as 'it' shares some fundamental similarity to the perceiver. If one can empathise with others only because they themselves have been through similar experiences, it seems clear that the range of subjects with whom one can empathise is limited to those who are like us. Furthermore, in such a framework, the range of experience is limited to the self. Drawing on the studies of mirror neurons, simulation theories of empathy are underpinned by a similar understanding

of otherness. Mirror neurons are a type of neurons which fire both when executing an action and observing or imagining others executing an action. Conceived as the neurological basis for empathy (Gallese 2001), they have provided evidence for a simulationist account of empathy which argues that when we see or imagine someone else's experiences, we activate "our own memory of similar situations, thus generating a shared physiological experience" (Ferguson and Wimmer, this volume). The simulation approach is thus underpinned by a concept of the other as principally similar to us and which we can "access" only based upon our previous experiences. If empathy is a matter of projecting one's feelings onto others, then, as Shaun Gallagher (2012, p. 363) put it, "do we really attain an understanding of the other or are we merely reiterating ourselves?"

In contrast to simulationist theories, Hegel's (1977) view is that the other is inextricable from the self in the sense that he sees the self and other in a dynamic relationship to each other. Furthermore, for Hegel, one's self-consciousness relies upon "being acknowledged" by the other (Hegel 1977, p. 111). From such a self/other perspective, empathy can be imagined as a process which orients itself toward the other and in turn is recognised by the other. Phenomenological philosophers such as Husserl, Scheler and Stein have offered different perspectives on the meaning on empathy as a manifestation of the self/other nexus, overcoming an interpretation of empathy as implying a sharedness of feelings or a dissolution of the self into the other. For instance, Zahavi defines empathy as "the experience of the embodied mind of the other, an experience which rather than eliminating the difference between self-experience and other-experience takes the asymmetry to be a necessary and persisting existential fact" (Zahavi 2014b, p. 151). Distinct from sympathy, empathy constitutes the very way in which we perceive others as distinct from the self (Scheler 1970). As Jason Throop puts it in his manifesto in the opening of this volume, in empathic encounters, we directly experience "necessary asymmetry between the experiencing subject and the subject who is experienced by them". Empathy is thus a first-hand experience of the "limits of accessing another's first-person experience directly" (see Throop, this volume). Alterity is thus constitutional to empathy.

In the literature on empathy, the phenomenological approach focuses specifically on direct face-to-face empathetic encounters which allow the other to be directly perceived. Steering away from a mentalistic interpretation of empathy to acknowledge the direct, material, and semiotic presence of other subjects, this perspective emphasises how, through empathy, others are revealed as minded subjects (Zahavi 2014b). Given its focus on the direct apperception of others' mindedness, the phenomenological approach limits empathetic engagements to minded selves. This brings to the conclusion, as succinctly argued by Throop and Zahavi (2020, p. 291), "that basic empathy is a phenomenon that arises only in the context of relations between fellow embodied expressive beings, which rocks or rivers, whether deemed to be somehow sentient from a particular ontological perspective, are not".



The question of whether empathy can take place only between minded selves is an important one because what a mind is – similar to what intelligence is – is continuously up for debate (Kohn 2013; Kind 2020). Thus, do we need to recognise the other as minded self in order to feel empathy towards it?

What do we call the emotions which we might feel for an eroded river, a rockfall, or a damaged landscape? Early theorists of empathy pondered on the feelings people experience for inanimate beings and things (see also Currie 2011). To Lipps, for instance, this was a straightforward projection of the self. As Zahavi writes, with reference to Lipps: “if I experience trees or mountains as animated or besouled, if I hear the wind and experience it as having a melancholy sound, or see a cloud and experience it as threatening, the source of such psychological content is in fact myself (Lipps 1909, p. 355 in Zahavi 2014a). What is really happening is that I am projecting part of myself into these external objects” (Lipps 1909, pp. 225, 237 in Zahavi 2014a). In contrast to Lipps, German philosopher Max Scheler (1970), proposes that empathy can be felt for anything, not just other humans. He writes:

The fullness of Nature in its phenomenological aspects still presents a vast number of fields in which the life of the cosmos may find expression; fields wherein all appearances have an *intelligible coherence* which is other and more than mechanical, and which, once disclosed by means of the universal mime, pantomime and grammar of expression is found to mirror the stirrings of universal life within.

(Scheler 1970, p. 104)

Scheler’s suggestion ponders whether empathetic interactions are strictly between minded selves or whether empathy can also be extended onto non-living or inanimate entities. Is empathy for an inanimate entity such as a forest, for instance, still empathy, or should we think of it as something else entirely, such as when life becomes bound to non-life as rivers, mountains, and ecosystems?

Writing on these issues, Vasudevi Reddy (this volume) reveals a frustration with the concept of empathy when she writes that the split between “cognitive empathy” versus “affective empathy”, as well the focus of empathy on dyadic relations, does not capture the feelings and recognition which characterise moments of “meeting” between people but also between people and things. “Openness”, rather than empathy, could be a concept better suited for exploring the varieties of feeling-thinking, as Arturo Escobar (2019) put it, that occur when we experience others, be these living or non-living beings. Reddy, for instance, offers us the fascinating example of atmospheres. Atmospheres, as spaces in between people and things, “contain aspects that go beyond individual entities or subjectivities” (this volume). She argues that “all actions contain and communicate contours of

meaning through changing patterns of energy, of tempo or vitality that give them their form". Such forms affect us. How are we to call the effect that these fleeting patterns exert on us? Or, as Williams (1977) puts it: how are we to engage "empathically that which hovers 'at the very edge of semantic availability'" (p. 134 as cited in Pedwell, this volume). By turning away from rigid definitions of empathy and focusing on psychological openness, a state of receptive disposition toward the other, Reddy's contribution draws attention to the interstitial spaces of intersubjectivity, spaces which are hard to pin down or describe because they are too ethereal and elusive and yet still crucial to provoke an affective response.

The phenomenological stance that claims that basic forms of empathy can exist only between like selves and beings brings forth the important question about how much the direct perceptions of others are influenced and shaped by previous ontological assumptions about the other. US children, as Kory-Westlund shows in her contribution, seem not to have problems expressing empathy for robots during direct encounters with them. Despite the ambiguous ontological status of robots, in the experiments described by Kory-Westlund, children seem to consider robots as social beings even after post-encounter further reflection. How, then, are one's direct encounters with another radically different being – for instance, a tree – informed by previous imaginings of that tree, its place within an ecosystem, one's understanding of it as a form of vegetative life? While we do not have firm answers to these questions, we believe that it is important to highlight that basic and higher forms of empathy can become enmeshed in the messiness of real-life abstract and concrete encounters, and it may not always be clear where one begins and where the other ends.

The untidiness between abstract imagining and actual experience in how empathy is lived and understood is addressed by several of our contributions. A clear example of how previous ontological assumptions shape empathic expressions is offered by Mezzenzana's chapter. Drawing upon her fieldwork with the Runa of the Ecuadorian Amazon, she argues that while the difference between non-humans and humans seems stark from the perspective of Western academics, for her indigenous interlocutors, access to the inner experiences of non-humans seemed to be relatively unproblematic and routine. For Runa people, non-human others – including plants and some inanimate entities – are not unintelligible (see also Peluso, this volume). Consequently, the way Runa people manifest empathy toward non-humans strikingly differs from the ways in which people in Western post-industrial societies express empathetic concerns towards the non-human world. For example, among the latter, even the status of animals is fraught with anxieties and doubts regarding what animal minds might "truly" be like or if animals can possibly have a theory of mind (Steiner 2010).

In contrast to the philosophical stance held by Runa peoples, according to Webb and her colleagues (this volume), animal ethology starts from the supposedly objective scientific stance that animal minds are unknown; they

explain how one should cultivate scientific detachment, in order to avoid making unwanted assumptions about the nature of the other (the other being, in this case, the animal). As Webb and colleagues notice, this process of detachment is considered ethically and scientifically appropriate, as it does not make assumptions about the kind of states animals might experience and avoid the pitfalls of anthropomorphic projection. In cultivating detachment – that is, purposefully avoiding empathy – the animal other is constructed as the site of unknowable alterity (see also Candea 2010 and Reddy, this volume, for an interesting comparison with psychology) which, in turn, creates an “artificial gulf” between human and non-human others, making them radically distinct from each other. These contributions emphasise how difficult is to disentangle basic empathetic process from more imaginative ones, as well as to map a relation between the two.

Additionally, these examples also demonstrate how empathy as a form of imaginative perspective-taking is a practice that requires effort. While lower forms of empathy are automatic, higher forms require work. There are multiple reasons why this might be so. First, as Douglas Hollan (this volume) shows in his ethnography of psychoanalytic encounters, the recipient of empathy – the “other” with whom we interact – might remain inaccessible or unknown to the empathiser. This is because empathetic engagements are contingent upon a person’s past experiences and require the empathiser to have some background information about the past emotional life of her interlocutor. Even then, however, attempts at empathising might fail because emotional states are fleeting and subject to sudden change, thereby making it difficult for the empathiser to map the states of the other. Equally, Reddy’s contribution makes the important point of reminding how unpredictable and fluid psychological states are. Indeed, feelings of openness and empathy might come and go; a gesture or a word can suddenly disrupt an empathetic engagement. The other – which might feel so close in one moment – can quickly turn into an unknown distant other within another moment. Contrasting the view that empathy is the cognitive projection of one’s feelings onto others that heavily depends on reading other minds, our contributors skilfully describe how frail and unpredictable empathetic engagements actually are.

An examination that is central to Hollan’s contribution and many of the other chapters (see also Vaage, Webb et al., this volume) pertains to the degree of accuracy with which one can empathise with others. Accuracy in imaginative empathy is a theme that has been widely discussed in the literature, particularly by scholars who argue that imagining other peoples’ emotional states is extremely difficult and rife with imprecision (Maibom 2010; Morton 2017). Yet, accuracy matters because, as Adam Morton puts it, we want “someone to feel a congruent emotion, but want her to feel it for the appropriate reasons” (Morton 2017, p. 183). Thus empathy, from the point of the view of the recipient, might not be enough: what is sought after is *understanding*. As Coplan and Goldie (2011, p. XIII) remind us, in the

phenomenological literature, empathy has been originally associated with the concept of *verstehen*: understanding. Such urging for understanding, while not always present, is an important component of empathetic processes. The hard work of empathy requires an imaginative effort that strives for accuracy. This struggle for accuracy, as we discuss in the next section, is also politically important.

It is precisely the imaginative effort entailed in empathy that is highly valued by some of the contributors of this volume. While the neutrally moral status of empathy is amply recognised by our contributors (see Peluso, this volume, for a stance on empathy as an ethical moment despite what decision is made or action taken; see also Wanner and Pavlenko, Özyürek, this volume), some of our contributors also view imaginative forms of empathy as an important tool for social change. Notwithstanding, imaginative forms of empathy – whereby one places an effort into imagining what the other might be experiencing – amply foster the creative explorations of radical otherness. For instance, earlier, in discussing the work of Scheler and Zahavi on Lipps, we posed the question: Can we feel empathy towards entities such as mountains or a forests? Anthropologists Cymene Howe and Dominic Boyer (2020) offer a reply in their experimental design toward tackling ecological loss brought about by climate change. They chose to make a short documentary about the death of a glacier in Iceland accompanied by a detailed biography and a moving obituary. The death of the glacier was broadly covered in the media, including *The Economist*, and received an overwhelming reception. For Howe and Boyer, the tribute and the obituary's success was due to their ability to make the life and death of the glacier recognisable and familiar:

Strangely perhaps, the story of Okjökull seems to have humanized climate change for a lot of people. It put a face and a name to an abstract problem. In climate change, as in life as a whole, small deaths matter.

(Howe and Boyer 2020, p. 21)

The semiotic and performative processes by which the glacier was crafted into subject-as-being follows the same principles by which one is said to more readily empathise with others who are personalised and visibly suffering (see Ferguson and Wimmer, this volume). A similar approach was undertaken recently by members of the Ecuadorian branch of the global Scientist Rebellion movement who affixed a placard in memory of the disappearing Andean glacier of Carhuairazo to draw attention to global political inaction on climate change (Rebelión Científica Ecuador 2022). These examples of mourning the loss of glaciers as living beings are strategic political actions which deploy the mechanisms through which empathy is activated. The question of whether such actions are politically efficacious remains to be seen. Empathising with a glacier or with another non-human is an imaginative tool for advancing environmental justice; however, one

may also legitimately ask for how long such empathy might last. One of the features of empathy that we describe in this introduction and throughout this volume is its fleeting, unstable, and unpredictable nature. Furthermore, to be recognised as a living subject does not ensure a subject's rights being respected. For example, the long histories for civil rights in the United States and elsewhere and the more recent Black Lives Matter movement indicate that legal recognition of life and basic rights do not necessarily go hand in hand with effective practices of care and protection. What place, then, can strategic empathy occupy within political spheres? How is accuracy positioned within and amidst political discourses on empathy? What assumptions about diversity and alterity underpin liberal calls for a more empathetic world? Can empathy help or hinder one in understanding difference? In the next section, we address some of these questions by looking at the relationship between empathy, imagination, and politics.

### The politics of empathy and otherness

Empathy is widely perceived to hold a significant role in local, national, and global politics as evidenced by its reference and use in the media, political leadership, and scholarship across disciplines (Clohesy 2013; Crawford 2014; Pedwell 2014; Jaskulowski 2019). Political discourse, actions, and movements set the foundation for how one imagines others, and empathy is often upheld as a capacity that can be nurtured and encouraged toward peace and conflict resolution within and across nations (Head 2016; Zembylas 2007). When empathy is not embodied or nurtured, or is lacking, it can potentially ignite ethno-nationalism and far right extremism (Sirin et al. 2021). Lack of empathy can also be politically detrimental to political pursuits, as was recently demonstrated by the unseating of Scott Morrison, former Prime Minister of Australia, who lost the May 2022 election despite his broad-based campaign whereby he vowed to exhibit more empathy if re-elected (McKeith 2022) and spent AUD \$200,000 on an empathy coach for his cabinet MPs while in office (Lambert 2021). Recently, Barton-Hronešová (2022) asked why empathy is evoked among Europeans toward Ukrainians and not toward refugees from other worn-torn countries, particularly at a moment in time rife with populist anti-refugee discourse. While she recognises that it is indeed significant that Ukrainians are white and non-Muslim in such a tense climate, she thinks that the empathetic process involved in Western responses to Ukrainian war refugees is even more complex. It is mobilised by close proximity and familiarity with Ukrainian culture and their political plight, alongside a *déjà vu* experience through the media's comparison of the Russian invasion to that of the German invasion of central Europe. This scenario of multiple familiars, she argues, elicits more empathy toward others who are less radically different than oneself. In addition, as others have argued, the political framing of refugees as a



threat – their constitution as specific dangerous “others” – is additionally responsible for the rejection of, for example, a great majority of Syrian (Langdon 2018) and non-white refugees from the Global South.

Overall, while empathy can result in positive actions for political and social justice, it can also be commodified, as in Morrison’s campaign, and serve neoliberal politics (Pedwell 2012, 2014). The trappings of empathy within neoliberal politics are expounded upon by Robin Truth Goodman (this volume) who ponders a quote from Obama that aims to celebrate literature as being key to enhancing empathy as one of the most important qualities for political life. In contrast, Goodman argues that rather than being a tool for progress, liberal concepts of empathy instead serve to legitimise and reinforce neoliberal market regimes. Her chapter suggests that the presumption of essential likeness – inherent to the liberal concept of empathy – is the same upon which capitalist markets depend. She describes how capitalism works by making subjects “all the same”, through the equalising artefact of money: it is through money that everyone is the same to one another and consequently interchangeable. In her chapter, empathy is not seen as a liberating force that enhances one’s ability to bridge differences, but rather as a concept that reinforces capitalist values and overshadows qualitative differences in class, gender, and race. Everyone is (falsely) equal in the market.

As empathy is popularly manipulated on today’s political global stage, it has also been historically leveraged to do so in the ongoing past. Empathy’s links to colonialism and neo-colonialism are equated with discrimination and exploitation through the guise of sentimentally linking assumptions about what is best for others with forms of oppression. Pedwell (2014, 2016, 2017, this volume) raises the point that empathy, and the way that one may become absorbed in co-experiencing another’s feeling, can be a distraction from the broader power structures that maintain inequality, the very same gulf that empathy is touted to bridge. Similarly, Binkley’s (2016) critique of empathy’s inertia in white anti-racist strategies questions how empathy – without the hard work of self-examination and transformation that leads to actions – can remain ineffective. Thompson (2019) warns how empathy can serve to reaffirm Christian values without questioning privilege. Empathy can also be gendered, with women equated as the empathisers – as imaginative projectors of others’ emotions and issues – particularly in discourse regarding poverty (Strauss 2004). Furthermore, feminist critical scholars claim that calls for empathy are misleading because they assume a mutuality of interests that simply does not exist (Lather 2009; Baer et al. 2019). And yet, despite such valid critiques, empathy continues to instil hope and inspire action.

Media and online resources are rife with prescriptions on how to develop empathy. Fiction, in particular, is seen as a fundamental technique to improve empathy. It has been argued that when reading a story, one predicts and infers the actions and feelings of the characters in the book, and that this

might translate into greater empathy (Kidd and Castano 2019). However, scholars are divided over this, with some arguing that empathy developed through fiction does not directly translate into greater empathy outside the reading context. This is because, as Smith (2011) heeds, even when reading one never quite loses sight of their own reality. In addition, while the neural mechanisms by which we might empathise with fictional characters might be the same we use to empathise with real people, the context in which these abilities are used is utterly different (see Ferguson and Wimmer this volume). Finally, one comes to reading fiction and empathising with characters with their own baggage of assumptions and dispositions. As such, empathy through fiction which – as for empathy in real life – comes with its own limits, one of concerns accuracy.

As highlighted previously, empathy does not provide certainty or accuracy about others. And yet, as noted by Pedwell (2016), many accounts of empathy conceive of it as a means to achieve accurate knowledge about other mental states. This positivistic take on empathy, continues Pedwell, “can function insidiously the interests of regulation, discipline and even annihilation insidiously the interests of regulation, discipline and even annihilation” (2016, p. 45). Instead of accuracy, Pedwell openly invokes partial understandings and attunement which do not extinguish conflict but rather embrace it as politically and ethically fundamental for acknowledging different and irreducible positionalities. In a similar fashion, novelist Zadie Smith (2019, p. 4) has recently called for the importance of “a fascination to presume”. Writing can be understood as predicated upon a fascination with presuming – not knowing – what other people might be like. Smith recognises that, in fiction, as in life, we are always imperfectly trying to capture something of the other. All empathetic engagements are imperfect – and necessarily so, as Hollan (this volume) reminds us. And while uncertain inferring of the other carries ethical and political risks, such imperfect imagining has a fundamental purpose. Perhaps more important than the outcome of these empathetic engagements is that they stem from a mixture of curiosity and attentiveness. Importantly, both the state of being curious and that of being aware and attentive emerge throughout this volume. For instance, Hollan suggests that for empathetic engagements to continue, one needs to be interested and curious about the other, curiosity which translates into attentiveness towards the other. Similarly, Webb and colleagues (this volume), drawing on Hanna Arendt, argue that attention is fundamental to empathy. They write, “in a state of attention, we let go of all efforts to decode the animal’s behaviour and instead allow the animal’s own way of being to surface”. The other – here a radical one – is allowed to emerge with its differences and similarities through an exercise of attunement. These moments of attention also bear striking resemblance to moments of psychological openness described by Reddy (this volume) and those of *Augenblick* described by Peluso (this volume) when Amazonian Ese Eja recognise the radical other as not just another non-human. For what are “insightful

moments of clarity and enhanced thinking” that happen during hunting, if not a specific modality of attention (Peluso this volume)? The question then of how different modalities of attention intersect and shape empathy is an issue that certainly deserves further thought and research.

### *Our volume: structure and contributions*

The volume is structured in three parts. In Part I, “Framing empathy and otherness: interdisciplinary perspectives”, our contributors set the stage by placing their work within existing debates about empathy and by refreshing their perspectives in taking on the idea of radical otherness and why it matters or informs these discussions. Part II, “Imagining others: human interactions” consists of chapters that examine perceived radical otherness among individuals and groups. These chapters not only speak of the perceptive and imaginative aspects of empathy, but also how otherness is constructed, confronted, and – at times – overcome. Part III, “Imagining others: encounters beyond the human”, addresses the question of how and when empathy is possible with non-human others – some living, such as animals, and others not, such as robots.

Murray Smith’s illustrious “Foreword” to this co-edited work of interdisciplinary scholarship, “Empathy Redux” (this volume) offers an overview of the research on empathy in neuroscience, psychology, and media studies alongside other disciplines. He explores the differences between what he aptly coins the high and low “roads” to empathy (respectively referring to the low and high empathetic abilities), the philosophical distinction between sympathy and empathy, and empathy’s very much debated role as a base for morality. While addressing critiques of and scepticisms toward empathy as a practical theoretical concept, Smith wittfully remarks “what does not kill you, makes you stronger”, thus emphasising how empathy’s substantial importance continues and indeed how “the idea that remains is more precise, better understood, and of no less significance in our quest to understand human social interaction” (this volume). He invites us to consider interpersonal and mutual attunement as a way of engaging with empathy’s radical other and calls for empathy’s ongoing revision in its critical role for both understanding and acting within and upon the world.

The volume opens with Throop’s ten-thesis manifesto on empathy (Chapter 1). The manifesto defines what empathy might and might not be and what its roles are in experiencing others, including “radical alterity”. Drawing on the phenomenological tradition of Husserl, Stein, and Schutz, the manifesto examines how there is a necessary asymmetry between the experiencing subject and the subject who is experienced by them. Within such a view, empathy is an experience of the limits of accessing another’s first-person experience directly. The manifesto is also premised on the ways that empathic experience discloses the necessary and ongoing limits of our own



self-understanding. Not only does the other exceed us, but, as humans, we continually exceed ourselves.

In the following Chapter 2, Vasudevi Reddy explores the concept of psychological openness. She argues that “openness” shares commonalities with “empathy” but that exceeds it in scope and differs from it, insofar as it breaks the boundaries between self and other. With its focus on perception and on the imaginative enterprise of feeling “like” the other, empathy maintains an essential boundary between I and thou. Reddy is interested instead in exploring moments of meeting, following Buber’s philosophical insights. The concept of openness, that does not rely on resemblance between two or more entities, allows Reddy to explore how we can be open to others, including non-sentient beings such as landscapes or atmospheres. This quality of openness, while fluid and volatile, forms an essential part of psychological experience. Reddy shows how psychologists however tend to dismiss open experiences because involvement with others is considered to be a bias for the study of psychological states. Yet, even detachment, Reddy suggests, is itself a form of participation, what psychologists refer to as “looking on” – a process which co-constitutes the observed phenomena.

Psychologists Heather J. Ferguson and Lena Wimmer’s Chapter 3 offers a comprehensive introduction to the psychology and neuroscientific research on empathy. They highlight how the differentiation between self and other is a core feature of empathetic processes. Furthermore, they show how a sense of familiarity (or not) toward the other influences empathetic responses. Thus, generally, the more similar the other is to the self, the greater the empathetic response, thereby confirming the idea that empathy can be parochial and thus not particularly useful for guiding moral actions. Nevertheless, Ferguson and Wimmer, echoing many other contributors to this volume, show how imagination can expand empathetic responses to include subjects who are radically different from the human empathiser, such as robots and animals. Ferguson and Winner also observe, for instance, that it is not entirely clear how different forms of imagination – such as reading fiction or pretend play – affect our capacity for empathising with other, thereby opening up the question of what specific mechanisms intrinsic to imagination might foster empathy.

In their contrarian Chapter 4, sociologist Damian E. M. Milton and autism study specialists Krysia Emily Waldock and Nathan Keates criticise the premise held by numerous psychological theories that depicts autistic people as lacking empathy: the ability to imagine the thoughts and feelings of others. Milton et al. turn such theories on their head by suggesting that the empathy deficit that is typically attributed to autistic people might instead be the reflection of a fundamental lack of empathy and understanding by non-autistic researchers toward autistic people. In fact, given that empathic engagements are more likely between people who are similar to each other, non-autistic researchers might simply fail to grasp the mindedness of autistic

people. Milton et al. question the framing of autistic people as a lacking (cognitive) empathy by asking what it means, practically, to empathise with others and whether knowing other minds is at all possible. They suggest that we need to understand autism relationally: not merely a deficit located in the mind of the autistic person, autism can involve a breakdown in reciprocity and mutual understanding that can happen between people of very differing dispositions.

Part II, “Imagining others: human interactions”, opens with Douglas Hollan, an anthropologist and psychoanalyst, reflecting on the limits of empathy (Chapter 5). Hollan shows how higher-level forms of empathy are certainly hard work and how, even with the best intentions and effort, one might fail in empathising with others. Hollan argues that too often, when discussing empathy, we focus on the empathiser and his capacity to imagine what the other might be feeling. However, argues Hollan, empathy is a dyadic process, and the recipient of empathy plays a fundamental role in one’s capacity to empathise. For instance, the recipient of one’s empathy might try to defy to the empathiser’s attempts at empathising or might simply be too difficult to understand/feel with. The recipient of empathy might not know themselves exactly how they feel. Drawing on his experience as a psychotherapist, Hollan stresses the processual nature of empathic engagements, highlighting how they are prone to fluctuations and failures and depend on extending beyond one’s cultural and social background to one’s emotional and psychic past. Far from being an automated response, Hollan argues that the process of empathising is frail and delicate, and requires much effort for an empathiser to willingly maintain engagement.

Margrethe Bruun Vaage discusses in Chapter 6 the limits and shortcomings of empathy in her analysis of antiheroes in fiction. The antihero, or villain, is the prototypical other: a morally bad character we would never empathise with in real life. However, she persuasively shows how when we watch movies or TV series, we can very easily empathise with such antiheroes through visual and sensuous techniques which make us feel close to them. Starting from the premise that empathy can be easily manipulated, Vaage reflects on whether empathy can provide a trustworthy way to morality. The answer, argues Vage, is not simple. She concedes, following the influential thought of scholars such as Jesse Prinz and Paul Bloom, that low-level, automatic forms of empathy are highly parochial, and as such offer no reliable ground to make moral judgements. Such forms tend to make us automatically empathise with those who are more similar to us, rendering difficult to put ourselves in the shoes of those we cannot directly see or perceive. In contrast to those who understand empathy as an impediment to justice and morality, Vaage shows how one can use empathy to stretch the imagination to encompass subjects of whom we have no direct experience. Fiction is a central means through which this can happen. She employs books such as *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and *A Passage to India* as examples of novels which have been able to shape the perception of readers about places

and people they have not directly experienced, and in so doing, help social change. Vaage insists this is a reflective, imaginative empathic project that requires effort, work, and skill.

Catherine Wanner and Valentyna Pavlenko point out in Chapter 7 the sharp differences in the emotional palette and morality of radically othered enemies, and how this contributes to closing “domains of commonality” that impede empathy. For many in Ukraine, however, portraits of a radical “enemy other” often match descriptions of their parents, partners, and friends. This challenges neat categorisations as to who the enemy is and sows seeds of division. At the same time, hardships driven by the war – and now COVID-19, as well – thwart empathy for the enemy. Military chaplains are some of the most active agents involved in reversing the loss of empathy. They rotate service between the front and the home front and attempt to help their compatriots overcome suspicion and mistrust, and cultivate an empathic impulse toward as a first step toward reconciliation and healing the wounds of war. Their chapter includes an addendum to their initial work written before the Russian invasion of the Ukraine in 2022.

Goodman’s Chapter 8, in contrast to Bruun Vage’s view on empathy as capable of fostering social justice, explores how historically empathy could be understood as a fiction necessary for enabling the flourishing of capitalism. Examining Sydney Blanchard’s short story “A Biography of a Bad Shilling”, as well as writings by Karl Marx and Adam Smith, she argues that empathy, as “a fiction of formal equality” is vital to capitalist forms of reciprocity, whereby people enter into transactional exchanges as if they were on equal grounds, as two abstract actors in the free market. Goodman suggests that the modern novel is born in response to the need of creating a cementing feeling of sameness at a historical time when impersonal market transactions became increasingly dominant. The empathic role attributed to fiction and literature is thus to be understood as fostering a feeling of commonality that is intrinsically linked (and functional) to the rise of capitalist markets which require the erasure of social, cultural, and political differences. And yet, Goodman argues, fiction can also subvert its empathetic role. She refers to *The Hour of the Star* by Clarice Lispector, which narrates the story of an anonymous, almost repellent, poor girl in Northeastern Brazil. Goodman argues that the text – in which the protagonist is depicted in all her unpleasant alterity – shows how fiction can depict the incommensurability of others’ experiences and forcefully point out precisely the limits of liberal empathy.

In her Chapter 9, Özyürek turns to exploring how the faculty of empathy itself can be used to discriminate between us and others. Özyürek draws on her long-term research on German minority Muslims and their relationship with the Holocaust in the context of a broader German society amidst increasing Islamophobia. She shows how in Germany, following World War II, empathy for Holocaust survivors is at the core of contemporary national identity. However, from the perspective of German educators, Muslim

Germans – of mainly Turkish and Arab descent – do not empathise “properly” with the tragedy of the Holocaust. Muslim Germans are, for instance, accused of making improper comparisons between Islamophobia and the Holocaust or blamed for feeling fearful for their own lives when thinking about the history of German national socialism. Özyürek shows how in this case, empathy itself is used as a yardstick through which to measure relative humanity and create otherness: paradoxically, the Germans, in their efforts to cultivate empathy for the tragedy of the Holocaust, deny the faculty of empathy to German Muslims, thereby rendering them as quintessentially “other”. Lacking the capacity to correctly empathise with the tragedies of German history, minor German Muslims are further racialised and excluded from national identity. Özyürek concludes by suggesting that there is no such thing as neutral empathy: empathy and the expressions it takes depends on our socially situated experience.

Part III, “Imagining others: beyond the human encounters”, opens with anthropologist Francesca Mezzenzana’s Chapter 10, which explores how perceptions of difference and similarity with non-humans shape people’s empathetic responses towards them. Within debates on empathy, it is often assumed that feeling empathy towards non-humans requires an imaginative effort, which allows a human perceiver to partially grasp what it might be like to be a non-human animal. While the difference between non-humans and humans seems insurmountable from the perspective of Western academics, it is not conceived to be so by indigenous people who live in the Amazon, for whom access to the inner experiences of non-humans seems to be relatively unproblematic. Drawing on fieldwork in the Ecuadorian Amazon among the Runa, she explores the ways in which indigenous Runa people manifest empathetic relationships towards animals and contrasts such experiences with Western conceptions of empathy.

In Chapter 11, Christine Webb, Becca Franks, Monica Gagliano, and Barbara Smuts question the conventional scientific practice whereby researchers are expected to avoid empathy with their study subjects in the service of “objectivity” and as a precaution against “anthropomorphism.” They argue how such an approach has the consequence of rendering non-human beings as radical others without minds or as beings with minds that cannot be known. Drawing on their own work as ethologists, the authors observe how scientific claims of detachment and objectivity, instead of being “neutral” qualities, create their own bias and determine the kinds of questions we ask as researchers. They propose thus to embrace empathy as a faculty that can give us a perspective on the non-human world that is attentive to both similarities and differences. The contributors then explore the benefits that an empathetic science could bring to the study of non-humans, both scientifically and ethically.

Anthropologist Daniela Peluso’s Chapter 12 examines how and when empathy with non-human radical others is experienced by or made relevant for Amazonian Ese Eja. She focuses on extraordinary moments of empathy

that shape “the rush” of exceptional and incendiary instances that emerge from encounters between humans and radical others in communities, forests and dreams. Given ontological underpinnings of human and non-human shared qualities, differences, and possibilities for intersubjectivity and transformation, Peluso views radical otherness as both radical difference and radical sameness, and examines how empathy arises in the swift transition from the former to the latter. She also seeks to understand the extent to which empathetic relationships matter in relation to stress-infused physicality and perception. Her exploration of the notion of *Augenblick* (“the glance of the eye”) as a moment that requires an ethical decision (no matter what the choice or outcome) elucidates links between empathy and encounters with non-humans in Amazonian cross realities adding to our understandings of radical othering. The chapter contributes to the interdisciplinary literature that views empathy as linked to action and presents an additional layer of perspective-taking through an examination of the Amazonian literature.

The section closes with robotics researcher Jacqueline M. Kory-Westlund’s examination in Chapter 13 of children’s empathetic engagements with social robots – specific robots designed to support people in a variety of contexts with special features that enhance their humanness. She shows how US children interact with robots in ways which defy the commonly held assumption that robots are just mechanical objects that are profoundly different from living beings. Kory-Westlund observes how it is through sensorial interactions with robots that children come to experience them as relational partners perceived to have qualities such as intelligence and emotions, thus becoming much more than “just” robots. In fact, according to Kory-Westlund’s research, children do not seem confused about the ontological status of robots and often manifest a whole range of attitudes and emotions towards robots that are typically reserved for fellow humans or animals.

Carolyn Pedwell’s “Afterword: Empathy’s Entanglements” highlights several of the themes that run throughout this volume. She emphasises how framing the question of empathy in relation to radical otherness allows for re-conceptualising empathy as a “limit experience” whereby the radical other might not be directly accessible or comprehensible, and where “understanding” might not be the ultimate ethical goal. Empathetic engagements that are predicated upon similarity, argues Pedwell, risk masking the gendered, racial and power dynamics that shape any subjective encounter. Instead, Pedwell suggests, an approach that focuses on radical alterity sheds light on the possibilities of engaging with others without assuming they are just like us. To maintain the other’s alterity intact is key to empathetic engagements, or, as Pedwell strikingly puts it, this allows us to be “affected by that which does not simply confirm what one thinks one already knows” (this volume). Drawing on literature on post-humanism and affect, Pedwell also suggests that empathy can be viewed not as merely circumscribed to single (often human) subjects, but rather as an affective relationship that encompasses multiple subjects and relations and is embedded within economic,



political, and cultural ecologies. Pedwell leaves us with an encouraging heed to continue to “attune” to the intangible aspects of empathy, also supported by Smith’s “Foreword” (this volume), that will continue to transform and extend toward all aspects of being and becoming.

Overall, this volume describes and contemplates empathy in various manifestations in relation to radical others and the way these are imagined. Its authors seek to understand how empathy is crafted and manipulated – and at the same time, its relationship to the constitution of otherness. Examining empathy in varying cultural contexts with ensuing types of socialisation and imagining highlights the fact that the way in which radical others are conceived is also an equally malleable process. While these cross-disciplinary analyses of empathy offer a complex and uneven view of the phenomenon, they also offer hope by suggesting that to better understand empathy and its manifestations, we need a more nuanced grasp of both ourselves and the processes by which we come to constitute “others”.

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Part I

# Framing empathy and otherness

Interdisciplinary perspectives



# 1 Empathy and its limits

## A manifesto

*C. Jason Throop*

This chapter represents an attempt at defining, in the form of a ten-thesis manifesto, what empathy might and might not be and its role in experiencing others, including “radical alterity”. In particular, the manifesto focuses on the limits of knowing others and one’s self which empathy discloses. Drawing on the phenomenological insights of Husserl, Stein, Schutz, the manifesto examines how there is a necessary asymmetry between the experiencing subject and the subject who is experienced by them. Within such a view, empathy is an experience of the limits of accessing another’s first-person experience directly. The manifesto is also premised on the ways that empathic experience discloses the necessary and ongoing limits of our own self-understanding. Not only does the other exceed us, but, as humans, we continually exceed ourselves. This is true not only in terms of the myriad of unconscious, non-conscious, and semi-conscious ways that our own existence outstrips us – those multiplex ways, in other words, that we do not coincide with ourselves – it is also evident in the always uneven grasp we have of our unfolding interactions with human and non-human others.

**Thesis I:** There are, as Hollan and I have argued (2008, 2011; see also Stueber 2006), “basic” and “complex” forms of empathy.

**Thesis II:** Empathy, or what we might more accurately term “basic empathy,” has no precise limit. Empathic modes of responsivity are continuously triggered moment by moment and are an ongoing, although variably prominent, aspect of every human encounter (see Throop and Zahavi 2020).

**Thesis III:** “Basic empathy” is an ongoing and primordial aspect of human existence that is necessarily tied to, is intertwined with, and arises from other foundational dimensions of intersubjectivity. As Zahavi phrases it, “rather than establishing intersubjectivity, empathy merely discloses intersubjectivity already at work” (2005, p. 168). Such intersubjective processes, as Duranti (2010, p. 10) explains, are arrayed along a gradient of orientations to others and objects that make a “shared and sharable – world possible” in the first place (see

also Duranti 2015; Throop 2014; Zigon 2014). Empathy thus makes experientially manifest our various modes of always already “being-with” others in the world (Heidegger 1996).

**Thesis IV:** “Basic” empathy is a form of direct experience. As Husserl (1989) and Wittgenstein (2001) both observed, we experience happiness shining through a smile. We do not infer it from the shape or movement of another’s lips, nor do we infer it from what we explicitly know about the details of another’s situated emplacement in a given lifeworld. Empathy as a form of direct experience is not a theoretical, interpretive, or inferential, stepping out of the stream of lived experience to reflect upon another’s perspective on the world. It is instead a direct experience of the dynamic expressions of another living being who is in the process of experiencing his or her shifting embodied engagements with that world (see Throop and Zahavi 2020).

**Thesis V:** “Basic empathy” is never restricted to visual modes of accessing and experiencing others. The entire sensorium – in various permutations, configurations, degrees, and intensities – is involved. As I have explored in some detail elsewhere (Throop 2012), there are most certainly tactile and haptic modes of empathy (whether arising in “marked” or “unmarked” forms), in addition to the more generally recognized visual (Song et al. 2019) and auditory varieties (Bryant and Barrett 2007; cf. Ochs and Schieffelin 1984). That one might be able to “smell fear”, for instance, should also alert us to the possibility that olfaction – as well as gustatory sensations and kinesthesia – are each also possible sensory modalities through which empathic experiences may be disclosed (cf. Calvi et al. 2020; von Poser 2013; Geurts 2002).

**Thesis VI:** While “basic empathy” may proceed alongside and give rise to possibilities for understanding others, “basic empathy” is not foundationally a form of reflexive understanding (cf. Thesis IV). Rather, it is a pre-reflexive mode of existential attunement to others that various forms of reflexive understanding may emerge from, be responsive to, or elaborate upon (Throop 2014; Zigon 2014). We do not need to know everything that others know – we do not need to share their values, perspectives, memories, aspirations, fantasies, goals, skills, or emotional responses – to empathize with them. To experience happiness radiating through a smile, for instance, we do not need to know the specific details of what the subjective experience of happiness is for the person who is smiling, nor do we need to have access to the complex sets of associations, fantasies, memories, feelings, thoughts, or images they experience alongside it, nor do we need to know what the specific context was within which their happiness was first aroused, nor do we need to feel happy ourselves. We may, for example, feel envious of another experiencing happiness without knowing precisely what happiness means or feels like for them or what triggered that happiness in the first place (cf. Ahmed 2010; Throop 2015). In short,



we may find ourselves responding to another's experience of happiness without knowing why they are happy at all or what the experience of happiness feels like for them at that given moment.

**Thesis VII:** While "basic empathy" has no precise limit, empathic experiences always arise at, and disclose, limits. As Husserl (1989) observed, although we immediately experience the other as a living being, we do not have immediate first-person access to the other's subjective states and intentions. We do not, and cannot, live the other's experience (see also Throop 2017; Waldenfels 2011). We experience their experiences by means of their expressions. Our individual streams of experience interlock by means of such expressions but they do not merge or fuse together as one (Schutz 1967). The other with whom we are experientially intertwined always exceeds us, as Levinas (1987) phrased it. There is thus a necessary asymmetry between the experiencing subject and the subject who is experienced by them. There is, in short, an irreducible alterity to the other (Throop and Zahavi 2020). Empathy is thus a disclosing of another's primordial experience that remains a "non-primordial experience which announces a primordial one" (Stein 1989, p. 14) from the perspective of the empathizer (see also Husserl 1989). Empathy is an experience of the limits of accessing another's first-person experience directly, although it is in itself *a direct experience of such limits* (see Throop 2010a, 2017). In this sense, empathy discloses the other *qua* other. Never simply reducible to the self-sameness of our being, the other always exceeds us. The "radical alterity" of the other is thus never dimmed down in empathy. It is, instead, part and parcel of the experience.

**Thesis VIII:** It is not only another's existence that exceeds our grasp. Empathic experience also discloses the necessary and ongoing limits of our own self-understanding. Put simply, not only does the other exceed us, but we continually exceed ourselves. This is true not only in terms of the myriad of unconscious, non-conscious, and semi-conscious ways that our own existence outstrips us – those multiplex ways, in other words, that we do not coincide with ourselves – it is also evident in the always uneven grasp we have of our unfolding interactions with others. As Alfred Schutz (1967) noted in his famous discussion of the "we-relationship," in those dynamic moments of face-to-face attunement that characterize mutual awareness of mutual co-presence, there are moments when another may perceive aspects of my own self-experience that I am not yet aware of myself. The dynamic flux of my field of expressions is palpably available to another in a way that it is not available to me. Another may thus be in a position to notice aspects of my own experience that elude me in the moment of their expressive and experiential unfolding. For example, I may not notice the mood I am "in" until I become aware of another noticing and/or commenting upon it (see Throop 2014, 2018a).

**Thesis IX:** Empathy, in both its “basic” and “complex” forms, is not coterminous with experiences of care, fellow-feeling, sympathy, pity, or compassion, although it may certainly be implicated in them (see Throop and Zahavi 2020; Mack and Throop forthcoming). Empathy is thus not restricted to modes of caring for others, helping others, or doing good by others. Empathy can be directly implicated in efforts to harm others, cause them pain, humiliate them, shame them, embarrass them, or violate them. As Douglas Hollan and I argued early on in our mutual engagement with the topic,

One thing that is clear from the limited anthropological literature currently available is that first-person-like knowledge of others . . . is rarely, if ever, considered an unambiguously good thing . . . . Although such knowledge may be used to help others and to interact with them more effectively, it may also be used to hurt or embarrass them.

(2008, p. 389)

As a case in point, Bubandt and Willerslev (2015) have recently expanded upon our initial efforts to foreground the “dark side” of empathy by ethnographically detailing a range of experiences that fall within modes of what they term “tactical empathy” – that is those situations in which an “empathetic incorporation of an alien perspective contains, and in fact is motivated by, seduction, deception, manipulation, and violent intent” (2015, p. 6; cf. Throop and Zahavi 2020).

**Thesis X:** When intertwined with efforts to understand others by means of first-person-like knowledge of them, “complex empathy” is never an all-or-nothing affair; this is a point I have made in an article on mourning, loss, and empathy in the context of ethnographic engagements (Throop 2010b; see also Throop 2018b). Instead, empathy, in its complex and hybrid forms, is necessarily processually, temporally, and intersubjectively arrayed. Empathy arises in and through time and between subjects and the worlds within which they find themselves thrown. Accordingly, empathy is always complexly intertwined with our habitual embodied and sensory attunements, memories, images, fantasies, affects, and moods, as well as with the various contexts – material, semiotic, interactive, and otherwise – that envelop, impinge upon, and involve us (Throop and Duranti 2015). For instance, our shifting emotional and mooded attunements to others may guide or pull our attention to aspects of a situation or interaction that reveal something of significance about another’s first-hand experience of the world. We may also, however, always revisit our memory of an event now past to reconsider our initial interpretation of that person’s responses and actions. As Douglas Hollan (2008) reminds us, empathy not only discloses aspects of intersubjectivity already underway; it is itself also intersubjectively arrayed. Empathy as a complex

intersubjective process involves not only the experience of understanding another, but also the experience of being understood. And of course, as made manifest in the context of intersubjective and dialogical engagements, the expressive, moral, and experiential dimensions of empathy may be significantly culturally, politically, and economically shaped. Processes of marginalization and racialization deeply affect the experience and expression of empathy (DeLeón 2015; Fanon 2008; Gordon 1995; Speed 2019). In such cases, empathy is without a doubt unevenly and unequally distributed, with some persons deemed more or less worthy of “empathy.” Acts of violence, harm, and pain are entangled in such variable possibilities for empathy with very real consequences for an individual’s or community’s ability to live a viable life or to simply to continue living at all (see Ahmed 2004; Butler 2004; Fassin 2011; Hage 2000; Pedwell 2014; Ticktin 2011; Zigon 2019).

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## 2 Being open and looking on Fluctuations in everyday life and Psychology

*Vasudevi Reddy*

A few years ago, I was lecturing to first-year psychology students and mentioning Wittgenstein's famous quote about psychology's "experimental methods and conceptual confusion" (Wittgenstein 1953, p. 232). I enthusiastically endorsed this indictment of the discipline, then belatedly offered an inept defence, saying that Psychology's was the most difficult of all domains of study. Later, I wondered what the students made of that. Did they actually believe this defence? Could it have made sense? As ordinary human beings untutored in Psychology's claims and struggles, would at least some things psychological not seem obvious and easy? After all (and I knew this well) even babies have no difficulty grasping psychological phenomena, participating with others' intentions and perceptions and emotions and expectations and practices appropriately and with relative ease. The phenomena that psychologists investigate are easy to break into and get involved with. On the other hand, one has but to look at the extent to which exciting new ideas take hold in psychology, only to fade in controversy within a decade or so, to become cautious about committing to its concepts. Psychology struggles with frequent disconnections between problem and method (Wittgenstein 1958)<sup>1</sup> and indeed between problem, method, *and* theory (Costall 2002). What is it about things psychological that allows people to get involved with them, showing a degree of understanding that is direct and easy, but at the same time challenges us as psychologists in conceptualising, understanding, and theorising them? Could it be that this very openness of psychological phenomena – inviting involvement and changing shape with context and participation – sets up a difficulty for a scientific stance which approaches *without* involvement?

In this chapter, I use Martin Buber's distinction of the *Thou* and *It* modes of relating and knowing to explore the idea of openness – and its converse – looking on, detachment, disengagement. Buber has had a strong influence in some areas psychology– e.g., developmental psychology and the psychological therapies. Although criticised for, among other things, the imprecision of his *I* and *Thou*, his insights remain powerful and relevant. I argue that both being open and looking on are constantly fluctuating processes – openness lasts for moments and looking on is not as uninvolved as we might think.



I am not referring to openness as an individual trait (as in the ‘Big 5’ personality traits) or to unrestrained self-disclosure (see Bochner 1981 for a critique), or indeed to a stance of neutrality. Rather, in Buber’s sense, I refer to openness as a specific kind of momentary relation between a person and an ‘other’ (whether a person, a thing, or an event). The everyday occurrence of moments of such openness are familiar and, though fleeting, can be crucial both developmentally and in terms of immediate meaningfulness. Moments of being open may be provoked by surprise or ruptures in normal patterns which are unexpectedly encountered or even deliberately created, as in playful teasing. Psychology as a discipline has largely (and problematically) committed itself to the other of these two modes – a kind of onlooking – as its method. I argue that for Psychology, as for people, recognising and using moments of openness and allowing fluctuating stances in its methods is the only way of approaching meaningful understanding of psychological phenomena.

### **What is this openness?**

Being open necessarily involves a partial breaking of boundary between self and world. Whether one is captured by the magic of a sunset or the atmosphere of a cliff top or responding to the depths of another’s feelings, there is to some extent a porosity between oneself and this other person or event or thing.

The notion of openness underpins the essence of, but is broader than, approaches to empathy and to discussions of the second person (Reddy 2018). It is both more and less demanding than an interactive criterion for second-person relations and undercuts many of the arguments surrounding the nature of empathy. Where many – e.g., Rogers (1980) – approach empathy as an accurate and acceptant perception of another person’s internal frame of reference as if one were the person, Buber’s focus is not on perception and not on being ‘as if’ the other, but on ‘meeting’ the other. Some discussions of empathy split it into ‘cognitive empathy’ versus ‘affective empathy’, looking at them as different aspects of perception and knowing, a split that sits uncomfortably with empathy as ‘meeting’. Ontogenetically, empathy was generally seen as beginning in the second year of life (Hoffman 1977, 1985); more recently, the developmental trajectories of empathic distress have been shown to differ widely, with empathic responses to distress seen even in some 3-month-olds (Paz et al. 2021). Perhaps most problematically, notions of empathy are built specifically around relatedness between subjects. It is possible, however, that the roots of intersubjective connection actually lie in broader ways of relating to the world, thus not presuming a complete boundary between the physical and the subjective in our relations with the world.

We can think of openness at different levels – as large-scale atmospheres or situations which surround us and within which we move or as encounters

which involve us directly and focally. The two cannot be independent of each other. In his famous dialogue with Buber in 1957, Carl Rogers argued that the situation of therapist and client involved an inequality only when looked at from the outside, an inequality: “that really has *nothing* to do with the relationship that produces therapy” (Rogers in Kirschenbaum and Henderson 1989, p. 52, emphasis in original); from the inside, he – as therapist – believed that it was a meeting of persons on an equal basis. Buber’s answer was a profound disagreement. The *situation* would object to this, he argued, embodying an inequality and difference that could not be merely willed away. The situation here refers to the difference in the interpersonal concerns of therapist (focused on the client) and client (also concerned with the client). But Buber opens the door to a broader range of openness – towards the non-sentient as well.

*Atmospheres.* One broad level might be an openness to atmosphere, to what psychologist Maya Gratier calls the “spaces between”. Using still photographs, she shows the way in which a complex relationality is evident in the spaces between persons and the world. Atmospheres, inevitably extended in space as well as over time, contain aspects that go beyond individual entities or subjectivities, and, connecting them by “a living fabric that weaves together the material, the sentient and the aesthetic” may be a fundamental condition for intersubjective experience (Gratier, in press). For the geographer Ben Anderson, similarly, we are open to the psychological qualities of even larger events and situations – what he calls affective atmospheres. He uses Karl Marx’s lecture in 1856 talking about the revolutionary atmosphere at the time:

The revolutionary atmosphere Marx invokes is akin to the meteorological atmosphere in two senses; it exerts a force on those that are surrounded by it, and like the air we breathe it provides the very condition of possibility for life . . . a revolutionary atmosphere must come charged with a sense of danger and promise, threat and hope.

(Anderson 2009, p. 78)

Atmospheres surround and envelop us but remain on the edge of semantic availability (Anderson 2009). More recently, the idea of “social breathing” (Kaiser and Butler 2021) posits an automatic process in which like air, we unavoidably ‘breathe’ in the affective and intentional qualities of psychological events and relations with potentially long-term effects.

This openness to the world and to anything that is ‘other’ or not self – is also fundamental to subjectivity, to *being* a subject in the phenomenological tradition. Citing Merleau-Ponty, Zahavi (2003, p. 6) puts it thus:

subjectivity and world are, as Merleau-Ponty puts it . . . co-dependent and inseparable. . . . Subjectivity is essentially oriented and open toward that which it is not, and it is exactly in this openness that it reveals

itself to itself. What is disclosed by the cogito is, consequently, not a self-contained immanence or a pure interior self-presence, but an openness toward alterity, a movement of exteriorization and perpetual self-transcendence.

Being open towards alterity goes hand in hand with the expressive nature of the world in general and of subjectivity in particular. Dan Stern's conceptualisation of vitality affects (Stern 1985) points to one way in which this happens: all actions contain and communicate contours of meaning through changing patterns of energy, of tempo or vitality that give them their form. These patterns are available to perception, not necessarily at a conscious level, and can influence the perceiver with a rapid complexity revealed in studies of kinematics and movement dynamics (Ansuini et al. 2014). We easily pick up the difference between and (most importantly) are differently affected by, for instance, a slowly widening smile versus a quick grin, or the jerkiness of restless movements versus the smoothness of calmer actions. Taking this further, these qualities of movement must also exist in the movements of nature, the ferocity of storms, the whispering rustle of poplars in a breeze, and so on, contributing to the fabric of our connection in space and time.

Even in infancy, the qualities of action are detected and adjusted to in complex ways; neonates are sensitive to different rhythms of tapping, for instance (Brazelton 1986) and rhythms of movement are often synchronised between interactants in complex ways (Feldman et al. 2011). The musicality of all actions is fundamentally communicative (Malloch and Trevarthen 2009; Mazokopaki and Kugiumutzakis 2009). Observed public events can be shared and reflected in the physiological rhythms of witnessing individuals – heart rates of watchers, for instance, reflecting the actions, risks, and traumas of those they watch (Konvalinka et al. 2011). This openness is inescapable, even, on occasion, to the sadist, the abuser, or the terrorist. One particularly gruesome example of unavoidable openness comes from an unlikely source. Rudolf Hoess, the infamous commandant who was responsible for the notorious '*arbeit macht frei*' narrative and the gas chambers of Auschwitz tells in his bizarrely honest autobiography (written at the suggestion of an interviewer in prison) about one incident when he saw a young girl who, although unconscious, survived the gassing. He writes of being utterly taken aback by his own visceral reactions – illness and vomiting – saying that he did not, till the present day, understand why he reacted that way. Despite his total conviction about the justice and value of the extermination policy, he was unable to avoid being open to the humanity of the girl.

*Encounters.* Being open at a finer-grained level of one-to-one encounters *has* to be seen within the context of such openness to atmospheres, spaces, structures, and rhythms. Intersubjective openness cannot be understood separately from our understanding of openness to atmospheres and larger events.

One crucial approach to what it means to be open is that of Martin Buber (1958). Although his familiar distinction between the *I-Thou* and *I-It* modes of relating and knowing is about individual rather than atmospheric encounters, these modes are not restricted to relations between subjects. His first example of *I-Thou* relations is in fact between a person and a tree. By acknowledging the possibility of *I-Thou* relations with non-sentient entities, even if different in some ways, Buber forces a greater breadth in conceiving of openness in individual encounters.

There are two critical aspects of openness as *I-Thou* relating: presence and transience. Presence is central to the unconstrained openness that is the hallmark of *I-Thou* relations. Moving away from a focus on therapeutic empathy, Carl Rogers, later in his life, raised the idea of presence:

I am inclined to think that in my writing I have stressed too much the three basic conditions (congruence, unconditional positive regard and empathic understanding). Perhaps it is something around the edges of those conditions that is really the most important element of therapy – when my self is very clearly, obviously present.

(cited in Geller and Greenberg 2012, p. 30)

Presence in Buber's writings involves a *unity* of being. To be present is not just to feel a response (while your thoughts may be battling elsewhere) or just to focus attention and thought (while you are emotionally absent). To be present, you need to be a unity encountering the other. Similarly, the encountered other (whether a person, event, or thing) needs to be met as a whole – not partially and not as a collection of features or attributes.

Just as the melody is not made up of notes nor the verse of words nor the statue of lines, but they must be tugged and dragged till their unity has been scattered in so many pieces, so with the man to whom I say *Thou*. I can take from him the colour of his hair, or of his speech, or of his goodness. I must continually do this. But each time I do it he ceases to be *Thou*.

(Geller and Greenberg 2012, p. 15)

As soon you adopt a dissecting stance – towards a person or a sunset or a sculpture – you are no longer present in that encounter; your relation has slipped into an *I-It* mode. Intriguingly, not only is the *I-Thou* not possible unless you are in the present, but presence is itself tied to being in a *Thou* relation; “The present arises only in virtue of the fact that the *Thou* becomes present . . . the *I* faced by no *Thou*, but surrounded by a multitude of ‘contents’ has no present, only the past” (Geller and Greenberg 2012, p. 18). The barrier to *Thou* relations in encounters might, therefore, come from either direction – from not being present or from the other's unavailability as a *Thou*.

This kind of openness is unavoidably transient for Buber. The different modes of relating are dynamic processes and fluctuations are a given. *I-Thou* relations not only cannot last, but can exist only in moments. “This is the exalted melancholy of our fate” he says, “that every *Thou* in our world must become an *It*. It does not matter how exclusively present the *Thou* was in the direct relation” (Geller and Greenberg 2012, p. 21). It is the intensity of *I-Thou* moments which is self-destroying: “It is not possible to live in the bare present. Life would be quite consumed if precautions were not taken to subdue the present speedily and thoroughly” (Geller and Greenberg 2012, p. 32). The fluctuations between *Thou* and *It* modes can be rapid, not always in clear succession but confusingly tangled, with *Thou* moments fleeting and rare: “The particular *Thou*, after the relational event has run its course, is *bound* to become an *It*. The particular *It*, by entering the relational event *may* become a *Thou*” (Geller and Greenberg 2012, p. 32). It is all too easy to find examples of shifting away from *Thou* relations in our daily encounters. In the middle of a passionate embrace, a stray perception of the shape of the other’s face might break the passion but perhaps be pushed away. A laugh out loud with a stranger may be followed by a thought about how easy it is to laugh with strangers – a thought which interrupts but then adds to the pleasure of the laugh. A political complaint against the buffoon who runs the country may be accompanied by the worry that you have to be careful whom you say this to.

What is involved in this apparently less desirable mode of *I-It* relations? Two features stand out. It is safer. And it is instrumental. For Buber, being in an *I-It* relation cannot involve the whole being – and in not being whole there is less risk; the individual gives him/herself less wholly, stands apart and considers, as it were, does not put him/herself on the line. If you are unable to withhold something of yourself in a relation (as in *I-Thou* relations) – the interpersonal risk is huge. You can be broken easily. In contrast, *I-It* relations involve an objectifying of the other – a making of them a ‘thing’ – and an instrumentality. You could see the other only in terms of a specific purpose (or ‘cause’, as Buber puts it). For example, you might see and address the child who walks in the kitchen door solely in terms of his dirty shoes, or respond to a colleague’s distress purely in terms of corporate damage limitation, or the behaviour of a participant in a study only in terms of the study protocol. There may be extreme situations where it is impossible to escape from instrumentality. Buber talks of Napoleon, for example, as a demonic *Thou* for whom everyone and everything round him was an *It*, an instrument for his cause. Crucially, from a developmental perspective, this instrumentalisation of relations can harshly transform the self. As a result of only seeing others as *Its*, we can become an *It* to ourselves:

the *Thou* that does not respond, that responds to *Thou* with *It*, that does not respond genuinely in the personal sphere, but responds only in his own sphere, his particular Cause, with his own deeds. This demonic

*Thou*, to which no one can become *Thou*, is the elementary barrier of history, where the basic word of connection loses its reality, its character of mutual action.

(Geller and Greenberg 2012, p. 54)

Closely related to the notion of an *I-Thou* relation is the idea of ‘moments of meeting’. Within modern developmental psychology, the notion is most prevalent in the psychoanalytic writings of the Boston Change Group, but common more broadly in discussions of therapy and communication. Moments of meeting are fundamentally dialogic – co-experiential rather than monologic and, in contrast to most definitions of communication, are not focused on the knowledge and skills *within* individuals (Cissna and Anderson 2008). Although individual histories and knowledge can always intrude – e.g., in cultural preconceptions of what babies are like and what they need – and although moments of meeting are not predictable or automatic, they can occur from the earliest moments after birth and are developmentally crucial (Bruschweiler-Stern in press; Lyons-Ruth et al. 1998). ‘Moments of meeting’, too, are literally momentary; they are moments in a process, not something that, once achieved is held, but events that arrive and depart fleetingly. They can end for different reasons – by infelicitous talking about the moment, by re-assertions of individuality, or by a self-protective disengagement (Stern 2004).

*Not* being open, then, can damage the self. To be a perpetual onlooker to others, or an instrumental user of others, leaves even the onlooker impoverished. There might be many developmental and existential routes into habitual ‘using’ or onlooking modes of being. Tolstoy’s opening lines in *Anna Karenina* may hint at this point. “Happy families are all alike” he wrote, but “every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way” (Tolstoy 2004 [1875], p. 1). Routes into closedness could come from the inevitable entry of the ‘word’, of naming or categorising and become easily a focus on the categorisation system to the exclusion of the particular. This is certainly a familiar phenomenon and risk within scientific ventures, but also easily possible within everyday relationships. We must all have experienced meetings where we have been seen as a member of a category rather than as an individual and are addressed as such “Oh you academic types always . . .” or “(you) Oriental people tend to be . . .” or other more subtle versions of this. Also familiar must be instances when our emotions – fears or anxieties – might rapidly freeze us into denial of the other, into a barricading of oneself behind practicalities or ritualistic responses. Whatever the route, in all of these ways of adopting an instrumental stance of not really being present in the encounter but of merely looking on, there is an absence of open connection with the other, an absence of meeting, an inability to be present, to respond openly, to see, hear, or know the other as a whole. For psychology, whose job it is, arguably, to know people, this absence of openness seems as though it would be a crucial problem.



## Psychology as onlooking

Some current arguments about methods in psychology involve debates about the manner in which the scientist should relate to the phenomena in question. By and large, psychology has adopted an onlooker methodology, one that has been deeply problematic for it (Schilbach et al. 2013; see also Webb et al. this volume). A spectatorial account of social knowing has been central to the Western intellectual tradition (Dewey 1950) influencing how psychologists believe they should come to know their ‘subjects’. The 19th-century invention of the scientist as a new professional identity (Costall 2010) caused psychology particular problems because of the dual identity of psychologist and person, and led to the development of ‘estrangement as method’. To deal with this dual identity,

the New Psychology had to transform the ‘*non*-psychologists’ into ‘*non*-experts’. One important way that this was achieved was to transform the *intimate* knowledge people have of one another (and of other animals) into a *disqualification*. Engagement, closeness, and *care* were no longer to be regarded as a secure basis for true psychological knowledge. (Costall and Leudar 2011, p. 43, emphasis in original)

James Sully famously commented on the inappropriateness of mothers as informants even if – or especially if – infected by the scientific enterprise: “Her mental instincts impel her to regard her particular infant as phenomenal in an extra-scientific sense” (Sully 1881, cited in Costall and Leudar 2011, p. 43). Precisely opposed to this idea of ‘estrangement as method’ is John Macmurray’s dictum that the way to understand persons is through personal relations (Macmurray 1991 [1961]), a dictum which has, however, never really been taken on board by the mainstream (Reddy and Morris 2004). The estranged or spectator view of social knowing has also characterised psychologists’ theories of how children come to know others; the ‘theory theory’ of social understanding, for instance, posits an analytic, conceptual and even theoretical route to making sense of other subjects (Reddy 2008). The psychologist’s use of estrangement as *method* in science seems to have spilled over into estrangement as developmental *theory*.

However, even in the determinedly impersonal settings of experimental psychological laboratories, experimenters find themselves unable to be as detached as they think they should be, doing the personal bits with experimental subjects off the scene (e.g., in the waiting rooms or in the lobbies) but not reporting it. The appearance of detachment and impersonality in the laboratory experiment is belied by – and in fact the experiment itself made possible by – the interactions that happen in the laboratory ‘waiting rooms’ (Costall 2010). Perhaps most infamous is the (possibly apocryphal) example of the Harlow maternal deprivation studies in which it later emerged that at least one of the research assistants was going down to the baby macaques in the middle of the night to give them a hug.

Outside the experimental laboratory, too, the first-year student of observational research methods was taught not to intervene with participants in the normal course of things, to try to be part of the furniture or as unobtrusive as possible. Where experimental methods require the removal of intervening variables, observational methods try to remove the observer. Before the advent of video cameras, this was difficult – but still deemed necessary.

As a PhD student doing a pilot study for home observations of interactions between 7-year-olds and their parents, my trust in uninvolved objectivity came a real cropper. It was my first pilot family; there I was with notebook and pen, all very friendly, but now I was taking notes, my eyes very surreptitiously (I thought) following the middle child of the three in the family. It was not long before I realised that my covert observations were quite clearly not covert, and the target child became the target of sibling teasing leading to a distressed throwing of a glass of milk over his own head, revealing not only their awareness of my intentions but also my own inability as a would-be psychologist to take account of theirs. This would not happen now – not because we have given up the idea of detached observation – but because we have simply become much better at being covert! One-way mirrors and GoPro cameras appear to change the communicative responsibility of the observer and reduce (but do not remove) the extent to which we might make the observed feel like ‘objects’ (Merleau-Ponty 1962).<sup>2</sup> The scientist observer, therefore, in contrast to the scientist experimenter, now remains better hidden in her onlooker role, but the determined non-involvement might afford subtler impacts as well as providing a barrier to a full grasp of events.<sup>3</sup>

Most of psychology, however, does insist on putting on the garb of the detached and unemotional experimenter/observer/onlooker. As Daniel Lehrman puts it, the model of science adopted is that of the behaviourist rather than of the natural scientist, in which the attitude to the experimental subject is not born of interest in the person as a behavior, but interest in the behaviour as something separate from the person (Lehrman 1971). The psychologist as scientist is also seen as distinct from psychologist as person, suggesting that the removal of the psychologist-person from the study of subject-person’s behaviour was irrelevant to the behaviour. A psychologist who could be utterly humane and sensitive in daily life (Lehrman gives the example of Skinner) could believe nonetheless that his/her own perception of reality is irrelevant to the analysis of behaviour. This separation of the person from the science (both within the psychologist and within the subject of study) results, Lehrman argues,

in a vast psychological literature in which the reader can find out neither what happens in the subject, nor what happens in the experimenter and in the training of psychologists (*of psychologists!*) who gather from

their surroundings that emotional detachment from the material with which they work is a pre-requisite for success.

(Lehrman 1971, p. 463, emphasis in original)

While this detached attitude may well be only a garb, belied by actions on the ground, sometimes psychology's management of the onlooker role is painfully real: take the example of still-face studies. To summarise for those who do not know the developmental psychological literature: prior to the 1970s and 1980s, there was a major debate about whether babies of 2–3 months were really engaging in non-verbal conversations with adults. When they gazed and smiled and cooed in exchanges, was it merely the adult's timely interjections which created the illusion of a conversation (that is, were these exchanges really intersubjective, or was the infant responding merely to the behaviour of the other, reacting but not feeling a response)? One test solution was the still-face experiment. These were planned with the best of intentions – to prove to the sceptical audience that it absolutely *did* matter to very young infants, whether their parents treated them as conversational partners rather than merely as creatures to be fed and kept warm and to show that infants even at 2–3 months could sense unresponsiveness, withdrawal, and – to some extent – genuineness in their parents. What it required was for the happily conversing mother to suddenly become unresponsive, to keep gazing at the infant in a pleasant way, but, literally, as an onlooker; they were asked precisely *not* to be present to the infant.

I tried this once with my first child. In all innocence, I suppose, to show to the great unbelievers that babies do have feelings and are affected by the relevance and quality of others' responses and non-responses, we tried to capture in photographs the changing facial expressions for a book. Why didn't I know better?

Shamini was about 6 weeks old. . . . In the middle of a good smiley 'chat' when she was lying on the bed and I was leaning over her, I stopped, with my face pleasant but immobile, and continued looking at her. She tried to smile a bit then looked away, then looked back at me and tried to chat, then looked away again. After maybe 3 seconds I couldn't stand it any longer and, smiling, I leaned forward and hugged her, saying "Oh, you poor thing!" At this, she suddenly started crying. Her reaction was a turning point for me. I was shocked. And very moved. I didn't know she cared. Neither reading about the research nor even, subsequently, watching . . . videos of still-face experiments, told me as much as this experience.

(Reddy and Trevarthen 2004, p. 11)

So why *didn't* I know better? Perhaps I had not really believed the phenomenon was real, nor known what it would be like. At any event, the hurt I inflicted – and experienced – was powerful enough to stop me from

ever doing a still-face study. Onlookers can cause damage as well as *be* damaged. Ironically, this (my) bizarre (attempted) refusal to engage made me understand the engagement in a deeper – because more painful – way. A methodology for psychology that requires that the psychological scientist be unaffected by psychological phenomena seems absurd. But despite that absurdity, we (as scientist-persons) do carry on trying to act as lookers-on in relation to our phenomena (see also Webb et al. this volume, for similar practices in animal studies and behavioural ecology).

### Onlooking in everyday life

“The onlooker has the best view” goes one folk saying, implying that a position of detachment – of impartiality and equal access to all points of view – gives the best way of knowing. But who really (apart from some naïve would-be psychologists!) *is* an onlooker? Perhaps typically, one looks to the spectators at sports as onlookers, but even here, onlooking is very far from a passive or uninvolved activity. Onlookers are very much participants in the game; the absence of spectators changing the nature of the play – as was often reported in the controversial 2021 Olympics in Japan during COVID-19 when only the sportspersons were physically present. Certainly at the start of the Games, the participants were complaining about it not feeling right, although by the end, they had gotten accustomed to the virtual reality of spectators. Or take the example of British tennis player Emma Raducanu, in her first surprising rise to fame during the 2021 Wimbledon matches, speaking with a charming joy at feeding off the (physically present) crowd’s support during the matches. Or take our own experiences of relying on student audiences in lectures – sometimes to our great discomfort when the faces are inhibited and unexpressive – and the difficulty that we all face in online lectures when the audience is completely hidden. Even when seeking to be invisible the spectators or student audiences are definitely not mere lookers-on.

But perhaps these situations are not fair choices – after all, sport and lectures *require* spectators and audiences. One might look instead to people on the street – observing an interaction perhaps or observing some fracas – as being the archetypal onlookers. The example of the 18th-century Parisian *flâneur* might spring to mind here (Tester 1994). Despite Baudelaire’s description of the flâneur as a passionate observer (who left the boredom of household life to walk about entranced on the streets of Paris observing the multitude), there was clear expectation that the spectating was without emotional involvement *with* the observed spectacle. The *flâneur* was anonymous, essentially ‘empty’, and the passion was for the process of watching. Back to modern-day city streets – where there seems to be simply no call on you to be involved – uninvolved is precarious. Let me give some examples:

I was walking down the aisle of a little corner shop some years ago, looking for something for lunch. As I turned the corner of one aisle,

there was a pushchair parked there with a toddler in it – maybe 2 years old at most. She had long blond curls and large eyes, and was strikingly pretty. As our eyes met, I couldn't help smiling, and she smiled back. I was startled by that encounter. Perhaps as much by my own inability to *not* smile as by the thought that that little girl's world must be absurdly full of positive encounters with strangers.

The fact that I smiled stopped me from being just an onlooker – I was clearly not 'just looking on' – I acted in relation to her – and it was a meeting of subjectivities. But what if she had indeed not been so pretty as to draw an inadvertent smile out of me – would I have more comfortably called myself an onlooker then? The lack of a smile could in fact qualify me for involvement with the little girl's gaze (in a negative way), as much as the effect on the girl of my lack of expression. And if I had looked at her but had not met her eyes? To what extent would the not meeting of eyes be the act of someone outside the situation rather than of someone not interested enough to meet eyes? It is common enough on urban streets that we avoid gaze and its subsequent duties of politeness as if relieving us of all responsibility – but it can still carry a moral connotation – e.g., when we avoid the gaze of beggars. The scary direction of this question seems to be that there may be no escape from participation: onlookers may not really be onlookers even when they think they are.

The role of onlooker is defined partly by expectations and is therefore a cultural definition. Certainly, cultural beliefs about the role of unconnected others – whether in a public bus or on the street or in the home – can influence not only who is legitimately a participant in a situation and who is not, but also what effect their non-participation has. In the UK, one might legitimately expect people on the street to be largely irrelevant to us, going about their business, not engaging even with direct gaze, unless necessary.

A Spanish friend visiting the UK for the first time came back from a walk in the city and told her host how friendly the British were – how they all smiled at her in greeting. Her host was baffled. The realisation only came later – this Spanish friend walked everywhere looking at people directly with interest and the people in question were forced to smile in the otherwise awkward moment of mutual gaze. She had turned potential onlookers into persons who engaged.

Even on the street, therefore, the role of onlooker is precarious, threatening to fall into direct involvement at any moment.

What about when we are removed in space, as well as time, from others? For everyone who has ever cried in a movie or shouted at the television during a political debate, it will be obvious that although a physical remove

might disrupt the literal mutuality of the event, it cannot stop your involvement. Take this example:

It is 2002 and there are communal riots in Gujarat with the largely Hindu police force shamefully turning a blind eye or even taking sides. A photograph in a newspaper shows one Muslim shopkeeper, his shop destroyed by looting and violence all around, his eyes filled with tears, his palms joined in a hopeless plea, looking directly at the camera begging for intervention. That front page picture hit viewers hard. Even now, thinking of it, my breath stops and sympathy for his anguish and helplessness follows – as does the guilt at being a part of the fabric that allows such pain.

To call myself an onlooker in this episode is somehow to miss the point. His eyes looked at the camera, towards me; his feelings aroused a response in me, the exchange left me acutely self-aware and suffused with feelings of guilt and shame. I was drawn into involvement by his act and his gaze to the viewer. Technically, I would be an onlooker rather than a participant. But the either-or categorisation does not do the involvement justice. The man was to me a *Thou*. He was looking at ‘me’ and pleading – I was open to him with a wholeness that was unquestionable. Even if for a moment. Buber is explicit – even when talking about an *I-Thou* relation with an inanimate entity, a tree for instance – that the *I-Thou* is a mutual relation. “Let no attempt be made to sap the strength from the meaning of the relation”, he says; “relation is mutual” (Buber 1958, p. 15). It is just as real a relation even though a different one. “The tree is no impression, no play of my imagination, no value depending on my mood; but it is bodied over against me and has to do with me and I with it – only in a different way” (Buber 1958, pp. 14–15). In a similar way, my relation with that photograph was real. It was not a real physical entity but rather a print (and so, in this way, different from the tree or a sunset), but this is a relatively minor difference. It involved past knowledge of that direct look, those teary eyes, that gesture (something that is involved in all our other meetings with people). The difference that is not minor, however, is the extent to which we may not be able to “give and accept the *Thou*” (Buber 1958, p. 13) from the tree or the photograph in the same way as with sentient beings who can respond. The mutuality is present, but restricted. Our momentary connections with photographs or videos or events seen at a distance can in this way of looking at things, still be *I-Thou* encounters; we may have a sense of mutual relation with the other as a *Thou* even without being able to influence the other. The onlooker might be gripped within an encounter of subjectivities with all its risk and sacrifice. Being an onlooker<sup>4</sup> seems to actually allow the potential of being directly connected to the looked-upon events. Observing others’ errors in a task at a physical distance – in a virtual reality setting – induces matching theta wave oscillations in the observer (Spinelli et al.



2018). Similarly, watching others' expressions of pain or other emotions can activate brain regions similar to those activated during first-hand experience, but is also influenced by knowledge of the context (Martini et al. 2013). Heart rate fluctuations while watching a ritual fire walker also show synchrony between the performer and the spectator if the later was related in some way – but not if unrelated (Konvalinka et al. 2011). To some extent, the role of onlooker might actually be more difficult than that of participant when faced with others' pain (Fischer et al. 2014). In the words of T S Eliot:

moments of agony . . . are likewise permanent  
With such permanence as time has.  
We appreciate this better  
In the agony of others, nearly experienced,  
Involving ourselves, than in our own.  
For our own past is covered by the currents of action,  
But the torment of others remains an experience  
Unqualified, unworn by subsequent attrition  
(T.S. Eliot 1963 [1941], p. 209)

In very different contexts, therefore, and at very different ages, it would seem that onlookers are not 'mere' onlookers: they are neurologically, emotionally, and morally connected, both influencing and being influenced by the others upon whom they are looking – and the onlooking, too, is a dynamic and changing stance. Openness to others, therefore, is not reserved for participants in interaction. It comes and goes even in the most unlikely non-interactive and onlooking situations.

### Surprise and ruptures: encountered or created

There are many reasons for the occurrence of *I-Thou* moments, among them perhaps shared ground and trusted spaces for engagement. But one spur is the occurrence of surprise or rupture of some pattern, of the “natural attitude” (Salamon 2018, p. 10) which causes you to do a double take. Buber speaks strongly about surprise as the mark of genuine conversation:

for what I call dialogue there is essentially necessary the moment of surprise . . . The dialogue is like a game of chess. The whole charm . . . is that I do not know and cannot know what my partner will do. I am surprised by what he does and on this surprise the whole play is based.  
(Buber, transcript of the Buber-Rogers Dialogue, in Kirschenbaum and Henderson 1989, p. 57)

He is talking about the *potential* for surprise – the unscriptedness of an engagement that *allows* each participant to be surprised by the other – as being necessary for genuine connection to emerge. But the occurrence

of surprise also acts in itself as a prompt for a return to *I-Thou* relating. Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on the making strange of ordinary things or the rupture of the natural attitude of Schutz and Husserl (Salomon 2018) points to the power of surprise in jolting us into connection and to violate what Throop (this volume) calls the experience of empathic limits. In a similar way, Daniel Stern's 'now moments' (Stern 2004) are like collisions which – unplanned and indeed unplannable – startle us into recognition of some break in expectations, some tear in the normal fabric of events, and which often precede moments of meeting. That is, the break or the tear acts first to still us and then allow the possibility of openness.

*Take the following example within a business interaction*

I am at Heathrow airport, my flight derailed by storms in the United States which were disrupting connecting flights. After much to-ing and fro-ing between different airline desks, one official tries to sort out the tickets. He is pleasant but business-like, barely looking at me. He looks South Asian, too. He asks me, without looking up from his monitor, what sort of visa I have (this depends on whether I have a British or Indian passport). I answer and then explain, unnecessarily, that I never changed my Indian passport, and then awkwardly add – perhaps because of the uncomfortable one-way nature of the interaction – “Difficult to give up your identity . . .”. There is no response for a moment, then he says in an even tone, hardly looking up, “It's all in your mind”. His words shock me. They conflict with his reserved manner and are unexpected. And perhaps because of this jarring out of place-ness, they feel like a sudden touch, a recognition of me as a person. His rejection of my clumsy revelation seems to strangely confirm who I am. Everything seems to change after that – the interactions which follow between me and his other colleagues seem lighter, easier, and more jocular. I feel like a real person. In this example, the fluctuations in connection are evident. There are the interactive routines – the practicalities, the business that needs to be discussed – and then there are moments when a channel seems to open between the two interactants and they connect genuinely but briefly. The example is very ordinary; if one were not looking out for it, it would fade out of consciousness – and memory – rapidly. But it is not unusual.

The official could be seeing their interactant as a sort of representative of their task – not as a person but as a functionary. Alfred Schutz calls this an interaction of contemporaries rather than of fellow-men (Schutz and Luckman 1974). The other in these engagements stops being seen as an individual, but as anonymous, only as member of a 'type': “In contrast to the way I grasp the conscious life of a fellow-man the experiences of mere contemporaries appear to me as more or less anonymous events” (Schutz and Luckman, p. 75). To contemporaries, we have a they-orientation (as opposed to a thou-orientation); “as long as they conduct themselves

factually as postal employees, policemen, etc. My partners in they-relations are types” (Schutz and Luckman 1974, p. 77). Or to put it another way, these persons are being used as objects of some kind (Daanen and Young 2013). In the example there was an event – a movement between finite provinces of meaning in Schutz’s terms, a surprise or rupture, which broke through the typicality, derailed the pattern and demanded the possibility of a thou-orientation. This is not limited to official interactions. You may be busy and focused on a task or an anxiety; you might converse with your husband or colleague or neighbour in a friendly-enough fashion in the service of your focus, but you are not really seeing them. Until perhaps they protest or joke or react unusually. It is only when the reaction stops you in your tracks that you can see your previous stance for what it is and your perception of them as *Its* in the service of your busy-ness. And if you do get jolted and see them differently, you have the potential for a brief *I-Thou* connection, a moment of meeting. Roland Barthes’ notion (Barthes 1981) of being pierced by the ‘punctum’ in a photograph can happen in interactions, too. The *Augenblick* moments described by Peluso (this volume) are also examples of these connections – momentary, powerful, and transformative.

The *Thou-It* dichotomy starts to weaken and even fail – when one looks at the rough and tumble of playfulness. Surprise or ruptures can also be deliberately created in playfulness showing fluctuations of stance in which the *I-It* seems inadequate as a descriptor. Playful teasing is a perfect example of deliberate rupture, leading to a higher level of connection and mutual understanding. You cannot tease (playfully, at least) without creating some sort of rupture, some sort of surprise. Infants tease others playfully before the end of the first year of life in different ways even at this age, ranging from offering and withdrawing objects just as the other reaches out, to playfully disrupting another’s actions to deliberately pushing the boundaries of newly learned domestic dos and don’ts (Reddy 1991, 2007, 2008). In many of these interactions, the adult ‘victim’ of the tease may be startled by the infant’s provocation and then, recognising its motive, respond with laughter or intensified positiveness. In the act of teasing, the infant teaser’s relation to the other shifts – from being *with* the other, attuned, sharing, participating, to being *at* the other. The act of isolating an aspect of the other – their physiognomy or thoughts, expectations, or intentions – and highlighting or challenging them e.g., by disrupting, playfully distorting, or violating, can suspend the whole-person *Thou*-ness of the previous enjoyable engagement, by a stepping back and a new focus on this one aspect of the other. In Buber’s terms, this has to be seen, at least momentarily, as an *I-It* relation, a fluctuation of stance away from the *Thou* to the *It* and back or as a sort of tangle between the two.

Take the case of the 9-month-old infant, sitting in a highchair at a family mealtime, playing the newly grasped ‘game’ of giving and taking objects with her father. She pauses in after many repetitions of the giving and taking,

and with a half-smile offers the object, whipping it back as the father obediently reaches out for it, and repeats the offer and rapid withdrawal with a broader smile. The father responds with sudden laughter and a recognition of her cheeky intention by demanding the object (Reddy 1991). The give-and-take game has changed now to a new level. Or take the case of an invalid grandfather on his bed (Reddy 2008), watching his grandson sitting on his haunches on the floor, playing with his cars; bored, and wanting to connect, he uses his walking stick to prod the child, knocking him off his haunches. The child responds with brief irritation towards the grandfather, then resumes play. The sequence happens again. After a couple of times, the child gets up to fight the grandfather and the whole interaction ends up in shared laughter and enjoyment.

But what is the shift actually? Here it is from no connection at all, boredom and separateness, the grandfather desiring connection but perhaps testing the child's possible reactions instrumentally – and therefore treating the child as an *It* – but resulting eventually in a real and enjoyable *I-Thou* relation. The shift could be seen as leading towards *Thou*-ness. So also in infant playful teasing, the brief stepping back to create a rupture can lead to a deeper level of connection after it (Nakano 1996) – and is less like an *I-It* mode of relation than an *It* in a bracketed *Thou* frame. Rosenzweig's criticism – that in setting up the *I-It*, Buber gave the *I-Thou* a cripple for an opponent – seems very appropriate here (Zank and Braiterman 2004). Stern describes what happens in talking therapies a lot of the time as 'moving along' – the stuff that probably has to happen to set up the ground for possible moments of meeting. The moving along involves a distance and a caution perhaps, even rituals, but may not involve seeing the other as an *It* – more like a holding of the breath, treading water, suspending relation, and waiting. There is much we do not yet understand about fluctuating stances, of the temporal nature of openness and about the nuances of closedness (Stawarska 2009).

The key point in these examples is that continuous fluctuations in modes of relating, created by unexpected or deliberate ruptures of normality, can lead to a sudden "sense of not having been there before with this person" (Doug Brandon, personal communication, University of Portsmouth). *Thou* moments are vital; encountering 'the eternal butterfly', to use Buber's image, stops us from seeing others or the world only as instruments and ourselves as no more than their users. They change us. Or rather, they *can* change us if we recognise them. Given their ephemerality, they can fade into oblivion very easily, their occurrence barely remembered, their effects stunted. If recognised and stayed with, however, they can deepen understanding and transform us. Perhaps Buber's sense of the tragedy and melancholy of our relations could be re-framed: the real tragedy may be not that these moments pass, but that even when they occur, we do not know them for what they are and what we could become.

## Fluctuating relations in psychology, too?

What can *Thou* moments and fluctuating modes of relating teach psychology? For Buber, recognising the two-fold nature of knowing in relations between people is crucial for understanding how we know persons. In other words, to know persons, psychology needs to acknowledge both modes of relating and somehow incorporate both into all of its investigations. The problem of course is with the idea of *Thou* moments: does psychology need them?

The nature of knowledge creation – of naming, systematising, and theorising – is inevitably an *It* mode of relation. Events, experiences, feelings, and thoughts can be hardened into ‘things’, banished into being ‘objects’ in Buber’s terms. Although this is also the case in relations with people, it is in the nature of science that this has to be the case. “For that is how knowledge comes about, a work is achieved, and image and symbol made, in the midst of living beings” (Buber 1958, p. 37). However, the conceptual object which hardens into a ‘thing’ contains within it the capacity to change back and be lived in present-ness. And here we (as psychologists) then have a choice – we can come to terms, as Buber puts it, with the world of *It* in such a way that we only continue to use, rather than live, the ‘thing’ we have created. That is, instead of engaging with it we look on and instead of accepting it as it is, we turn it to our own account. Or, we can return the object, the ‘thing’ or the *It*, again to its raw state of being – as a real and effective act of knowing *between* people. We do not need to leave, use, appropriate, and conquer as *It* that which has become *It*. It is the returning of these objects of knowing back to *Thou* relation which allows knowledge to be “real and effective” (Buber 1958, p. 37).

Psychology’s troubled history of attempts to develop a methodology suited to its subject matter have often resulted in tensions between the extent to which psychologists may or may not allow personal relations to enter method and theory. Without question, the power structures of science are unbalanced – the more quantitative or normative methods (Watts 1965) – hold most of the cards, the money, and the prestige. ‘Hard’ science scoffs at the particularity and local nature of ‘soft’ qualitative methods. The huge advantages of a more objective *It* mode of knowing make it seem pointless to spend time on responding to the objects of knowledge in a *Thou* mode, making

the moments of the *Thou* appear as strange lyric and dramatic episodes, seductive and magical, but tearing us away to dangerous extremes, loosening the well-trying context, leaving more questions than satisfaction behind them, shattering security – in short, uncanny moments we can well dispense with. For since we are bound to leave them and go back into the ‘world’, why not remain in it?

(Buber 1958, p. 32)

Buber's answer to this very reasonable 'why' question is that instrumentality kills the moment, the present. The hardening of our psychological objects into things removes us from live relation. As persons, our knowledge would be destructive and meaningless if we only engaged in instrumental and objective *It* relations. Can this be true for psychology's knowledge of persons, too?

Many research ventures in psychology begin from personal encounters, even though the scientist's training imposes a forgetfulness about this. It is embarrassing to write – "I saw this in my child" or "I felt so happy seeing this" or "my child did this incredible thing". It is easier by far to keep it impersonal and to appear to look at things impersonally. Even if one overcomes the embarrassment of admitting an observation of one's own child, admitting emotion about it is really taboo: one could reveal that one found this so interesting or puzzling or curious or odd – all acceptable investigative feelings, but no more (see also Webb et al. this volume). I cringe now on hearing an old interview of mine in which I was asked about my experience of the birth of my first child. My response was basically about how "interesting" she was!

Although many studies begin from the personal, they do not often stay with it or come back to it. Is this a problem? Take the example of one phenomenon with which I am familiar from the start. My son was about 4 months old. I leaned forward to pick him up from a baby chair, and as my hands contacted his torso and back, I could feel the back had already arched in tension. The experience of and the curiosity about this anticipatory back-arching stayed. Many years later, I found a method of measuring that anticipatory tension in the body and designed a study with colleagues (Reddy et al. 2013). It was going to be a smart, clean experimental study with controlled variations in the adult's direction of approach (a number of degrees to the side versus straight forward) and in whether she had her arms out with control of all confounding variables such as facial expression, gaze direction, and vocalisations (all kept pleasant but uniform) by the adult. The simplest solution was to have the same experimenter conduct all the trials with all the infants. The equipment was purchased, the lab was set up, the infants were recruited, and off we went. It was a disaster. The babies just looked at us and did nothing. There were several options facing us in our depression. We could have gone for a slightly older age group of babies. We could abandon the whole study. We could re-think our experimental controls.<sup>5</sup> The memory of feeling that back-arching in my fingertips was powerful, however, and we went for the last option. We got the mothers involved in the approach task and reduced the number of variables we wanted to examine. This was a fortunate choice. Optimism re-asserted itself over the next weeks: we could see clear evidence of the phenomenon earlier and in ways we had not expected, and we became cocky again. There were a few mothers who didn't quite follow our instructions (which were simple, we thought: first chat as you would normally, then make



the approach from the front and only when the baby is looking), and one in particular who kept teasing the baby with approach and withdrawal, and whom we tried to ‘manage’ and contain. Once we got our wonderful data, and started number crunching, our connection to the phenomenon became even more distant – we didn’t need the personal stories anymore and had to make an effort to re-engage with its meaningfulness from time to time. The data are still wonderful, but one wonders what could have been if we had allowed it freer reign. Shortly after, a wonderful Japanese study was published on the same phenomenon – styles of maternal pick-up approach to slightly older infants and their responses, described in the context of intersubjective tactile communication and the desire for contact (Negayama et al. 2015) – much richer *Thou* relations were permitted into the phenomenon.

Personal involvement with developmental phenomena has always yielded rich observational data, although much criticised, ignored, and not cited by major writers. In this domain, at least, claims about infant intersubjective capacities have, after decades of scorn and dismissal, often been accepted within the scientific orthodoxy. Trevarthen’s claims about primary intersubjectivity and conversations with 2-month-olds is the prime example of this (Trevarthen 1974, 1979). The phenomenon is, ironically, exactly about *I-Thou* engagement between infant and mother. Dismissed even by the most sympathetic critics as claiming too much too early (e.g., see Stern 1985 or Mahler et al. 1975) thirty years after its description, and after enormous amounts of research going down blind alleys and harsh tests, the phenomenon is now part of textbooks. Conflicting findings between observations of infant skills at home, for instance, and experimental findings of infant lack of skills in the laboratory are common: children cannot tell lies before 4 years of age (yes they can); infants cannot point to show before 18 months of age (yes they can); infants cannot show self-conscious affects before 18 months (yes they can); and so on (see Reddy and Morris [2004] for some examples of such conflict in the study of infant social understanding). One might argue that empirical contradictions are a part of science, that these ‘discoveries’ are a part of scientific development. But these are only discoveries for some – even less convincing than the ‘discovery’ of America by Columbus. There has got to be a better way to do psychological science than to spend millions of hours and pounds chasing hypotheses derived from logical arguments alone; a way which does not involve dislocating psychological phenomena from their sources of meaning.

To come back to Wittgenstein’s verdict of psychology’s conceptual confusion: the interpretation of this verdict has largely been that Wittgenstein is picking up on psychologists’ frequent assumption that in naming their concepts, they have somehow escaped from bias; that they forget the extent to which psychological phenomena are part of the language and culture of the scientist and are constituted by the very linguistic distinctions and practices used to understand them (Bredo 2006). But it is not only

linguistic practices which constitute psychological phenomena: the scientist's personal involvement in any psychological phenomenon – which must vary enormously in degree and kind – must also be fundamentally part of the named, defined, and studied phenomenon. The openness of such phenomena allows us to know them and to know them in a certain way. To paraphrase a conclusion about the co-constitution of culture and mind (Shweder and Sullivan 1993), psychology and psychological phenomena make each other up. To not recognise this is a good part of the conceptual confusion.

Just as persons suffer from an absence of *Thou* relations, psychology has been hampered as a science from its attempts to be distant from its subject matter, not valuing sensitivity to the scientist's emotional responses, and allowing many phenomena to pass us by. Twentieth-century psychology places little emphasis on these moments of connection and certainly does not sensitise us to their occurrence in our scientific process. De Jaegher's impassioned plea for recognising loving as a valid way of knowing (De Jaegher 2021) might take another twenty years to be properly heard. Although much psychological research might – and indeed must – begin from personal relevance and remembered *Thou* relations, by prioritising obedience to the rituals of method over sensitivity to moments of meeting, we seem to veer into many scientific blind alleys and a frequently dull science. The only way forward is to keep re-grounding our analyses in the experience of the phenomenon, and vice versa, re-experiencing the phenomenon in the face of the analysis. To just start research with this experience then to leave it behind is futile – both modes of relation need to 'talk' to each other through the process of understanding. They cannot simply merge – their difference is irreconcilable and cannot be submerged in an integration; it is their fluctuation that keeps phenomena present. To come back to Buber's terminology, the psychologist needs to make and re-make the phenomenon a *Thou* (the *I* of the psychologist changing in each shift) from its inevitable slipping into an *It*. Psychology's methods problem is not one of how to embrace detachment. It is one of accepting that detachment itself as participatory (even looking on co-constitutes phenomena). Nor is it a problem of how to create the particularity of *Thou* moments in its science: we cannot plan for these moments or force their occurrence. The problem we face is one of recognising them when they do happen during our studies, giving them space to be and allowing our knowledge to develop through them. The tragedy for psychology, too, is of not recognising the moments and not realising how they can transform our science if we let them in to science. We are still wading as if through treacle in understanding how being persons should relate to our being scientists, how to do what ordinary folk manage in their daily lives: fluctuate between moments of openness and periods of routine, ritual, and looking on.

## Notes

1 Wittgenstein (1958, p. 232):

The confusion and barrenness of psychology is not to be explained by calling it a ‘young science’; its state is not comparable with that of physics, for instance, in its beginnings . . . . For in psychology, there are experimental methods and conceptual confusion. The existence of the experimental method makes us think that we have the means of solving the problems which trouble us; though problem and method pass one another by.

2 Merleau-Ponty (1962, pp. 360–361):

The other person transforms me into an object and denies me, I transform him into an object and deny him, it is asserted. In fact the other’s gaze transforms me into an object, and mine him, only if both of us withdraw into the core of our thinking nature, if we both make ourselves into an inhuman gaze, if each of us feels his actions to be not taken up and understood, but observed as if they were an insect’s. This is what happens, for instance, when I fall under the gaze of a stranger. But even then, the objectification of each by the other’s gaze is felt as unbearable only because it takes the place of possible communication.

- 3 Being excluded from participation – even in a relatively trivial activity such as a ball tossing game in a laboratory – can rapidly (within 4 minutes!) cause dejection (Williams 1997; Zadro et al. 2004). Even when repeated as a 6 minute online ball tossing game, and told that they were playing with computer-generated players, participants who were excluded reported lower levels of belonging, control, self-esteem and meaningful existence. Even more bizarre, even when participants were told that the excluding persons were ‘reading from a script’ about whether to include or exclude them, they reported lower levels of belongingness, control, meaningful existence and enjoyment and higher levels of anger and (in relation to exclusion by the computer) hurt feelings, even if the exclusion was known to be pre-scripted. The slightest hint of ostracism, it seems, is felt as a depleting experience which undermines otherwise rational reactions to situations.
- 4 Within fields as far apart as sports psychology and business studies, the categorical boundary around the onlooker is being taken apart empirically. Within the business world, an onlooker is defined as someone inside the organisation to whom another individual’s actions are visible but who is not involved in their activities. Very reminiscent of Sartre’s watched Peeping Tom, the presence of the onlooker to a wrong-doing can induce strong self-conscious affect – shame, guilt, fear, and embarrassment – and reduce wrongdoings (Farshadkhah 2020; Farshadkhah et al. 2021). But onlookers’ awareness of wrong-doing in others can have the opposite effect – it can enhance their own wrong-doing (Ferguson and Barry 2011). Even in the field of sports – where one might argue that the boundary between an active player and the passive spectator is beyond question – the boundary is far from clear. There is an in-between space between player and spectator where the onlooker can violate their own role, commenting on and attempting to direct actions, and where the player’s awareness of this involvement then influences their play (Maurer et al. 2015; Kimble and Rezabek 1992; Kappen et al. 2014).
- 5 One could argue that the psychological experiment is much like the deliberately created rupture in playful teasing – testing to see ‘what happens if’. However, the frame is totally different: the focus in the playful teasing is entirely on the particular other and they can maintain the *Thouness* of the encounter. Experimental procedures can do this, too (variations in methods in studies of neonatal imitation are a good example of this) – but with much greater difficulty.

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# 3 A psychological exploration of empathy

*Heather J. Ferguson and Lena Wimmer*

## Empathy as a psychological concept

Empathy is a multidimensional construct that has attracted a great deal of research over many decades, but no single agreed-upon definition of empathy exists, even within psychology as a unitary discipline. Indeed, different researchers in the field use various terms to refer to similar concepts, and the same terms to refer to distinct concepts (Happé et al. 2017). It is important to note that these conceptual ambiguities regarding empathy affect how empathy is measured (Olderbak and Wilhelm 2017), and therefore on empirical findings, as well. In what follows, we offer a non-exhaustive overview of empathy and related phenomena. In doing so, we aim to present views on which at least some consensus has been reached, and to provide a terminological foundation for the remainder of this chapter.

In general, empathy has been used as an umbrella term for processes contributing to sharing and understanding the affective state of another person (Håkansson Eklund and Summer Meranius 2021). Many researchers posit that empathy is a multi-faceted construct with a hierarchical structure, meaning that it involves lower- and higher-level processes differing in cognitive complexity (Preston et al. 2020; Schurz et al. 2020; Zurek and Scheithauer 2017). Among the lower-level processes is *emotion recognition*, the capacity to decode the emotional states of others. Emotion recognition typically draws on facial or bodily cues (Preston et al. 2020), for instance when we assume someone with a smiling face to be happy. The higher-level processes comprise affective and cognitive empathy (see Throop, this volume). *Affective empathy* or *emotional empathy* occurs when we share others' emotional state whilst being aware that the source of our emotional response is the other person (Cuff et al. 2016). The presence of such self-other distinction differentiates affective empathy from *emotional contagion*, an automatic adoption of others' emotions that lacks self/other distinction (de Vignemont and Singer 2006). A baby who spontaneously catches another baby's cry without recognising that the source of their own crying is the other baby exemplifies emotional contagion. In contrast, a student who is sad with a fellow student for their broken relationship and imagines

the friend's emotional pain in a reflective way illustrates affective empathy. *Cognitive empathy* can be considered as understanding of the emotional state of others (cf. Preston et al. 2020). *Perspective taking* can serve as a tool for cognitive empathy, but also for *Theory of Mind (ToM)*. ToM is an overlapping but broader construct than cognitive empathy, since it goes beyond understanding the emotional states of others insofar as it addresses comprehending mental states in general (Preston et al. 2020). *Mentalising* is often used as a synonym of ToM.

## **Measures to assess empathy in humans and their challenges**

In this section, we will review some of the most common methods with which empathy has been measured in psychological research. According to a review by Di Girolamo and colleagues (Di Girolamo et al. 2017), empathy has been most extensively assessed using *self-report questionnaires*. Here, respondents estimate their own level of empathy by indicating how much they agree with statements suggesting a high extent of this ability. Rating scales typically offer graded response options, which culminate in one or more summed scores to indicate one's level of empathy. For instance, in the most frequently applied instrument, the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI; Davis 1980), participants are presented with 28 items (e.g. "I am often quite touched by things that I see happen") and use a five-point Likert scale ranging from "does not describe me well" to "describes me well" to state how much they perceive a described behaviour to be present in themselves. The IRI covers four aspects of trait empathy: fantasy, perspective taking, empathic concern, and personal distress. However, despite their frequent use in the literature, self-report questionnaires have been strongly criticised for their reliability (Di Girolamo et al. 2017; Harrison et al. 2020). Among others, there are concerns that self-report instruments are susceptible to social desirability: items are usually phrased in a way that allows guessing the response associated with high levels of empathy. Since empathy is a socially desirable ability, respondents who wish to be socially accepted may be tempted to select that response option, even if it is against their honest judgement. Beyond that, there are doubts that people low in empathic skills possess the ability to assess empathy in themselves, which may also distort results. The limited validity of self-report questionnaires is confirmed by correlations with behavioural indicators suggesting weak associations at best (Israelashvili et al. 2019; Melchers et al. 2015; Murphy and Lilienfeld 2019).

*Computer-based tasks* offer a behavioural – and thus more direct – indicator of empathy. One of the most widely used computer tasks that is purported to measure empathy is the Reading the Mind in the Eyes Test (RMET; Baron-Cohen et al. 2001), in which observers select an emotion word that best describes the mental state of eye images. However, in recent years, this task has been criticised for its association with verbal intelligence

(Baker et al. 2014), and it is now largely considered a measure of emotion recognition (Oakley et al. 2016). Paradigms measuring *cognitive empathy* are scarce, though a number of behavioural paradigms assess ToM more broadly. For instance, in the Strange Stories task (Happé 1994), participants are presented with vignettes describing complex mental or social interactions including white lie, double bluff, and the like. After each vignette, participants are prompted to explain a character's behaviour or why certain events happened, which requires an advanced level of mentalising. The challenges of employing this task to less verbal participants and the need to understand more naturalistic social processes prompted the development of the Strange Stories Film task (Murray et al. 2017), though it still lacks specificity to empathy and struggles to distinguish between participants' ability versus propensity to consider others' mental states. In another task, *empathy for pain* is assessed as participants observe pictures depicting painful or painless scenarios and rate the pain intensity using a visual analogue scale (Preis et al. 2013), with the assumption that high pain ratings for 'painful' pictures reflect a high level of empathy for others' pain.

In recent years, these computer-based empathy for pain tasks have been combined with *neuroimaging measures* (e.g. functional magnetic resonance imaging, fMRI) or *electrophysiological brain recordings* (e.g. electroencephalogram, EEG). These measures have the advantage of revealing neurophysiological correlates of empathy with high spatial/temporal resolution whilst participants are actively engaging these processes. Moreover, the paradigms can be adapted to remove the explicit task (e.g. simply viewing painful [or not] images) which enables analyses of the brain's spontaneous empathy responses. Using these tasks, functional neuroimaging studies have distinguished brain areas that are engaged in affective and cognitive components of empathy, and have identified a 'core network' that is recruited across different empathy tasks (de Waal and Preston 2017). Studies that have employed EEG have focused on *event-related potentials* (ERPs; i.e. averaged brain wave responses) or *oscillatory brain activity* (i.e. patterns of rhythmic neural activity) time-locked to the presentation of critical stimuli (e.g. pictures depicting pain). Empathy for pain has been found to modulate ERP components including the P3, characterised by a positive peak approximately 300 milliseconds after stimulus onset (Polich 2007), and the late positive potential (LPP), which appears as a broad wave with a peak around 700 milliseconds upon stimulus onset (Cuthbert et al. 2000). Both the P3 and LPP are associated with sustained conscious processing and evaluation of motivationally important cues, and thus their activation in empathy for pain tasks is inferred to represent participants' social understanding and emotion regulation (Coll 2018). Analysis of neural oscillations has revealed that empathy modulates neural activity over the sensorimotor cortex, known as the human mirror neuron system. Mirror neurons fire both when we execute an action and when we observe others executing an action; thus, they are thought to be configured by the repeated co-occurrence of sensory

input and motor output, which subserve mimicry behaviour (Heyes 2001). Related to empathy, it is suggested that the mirror neuron system captures the brain's simulation response to observing others in pain (Iacoboni 2009); seeing or imagining another person's experience activates our own memory of similar situations, thus generating a shared physiological experience (known as the Perception-Action Model of empathy; Preston and de Waal 2002). Suppression of *mu activity* over the sensorimotor cortex (i.e. a desynchronised neural firing rhythm between 8Hz and 13Hz) is typically inferred as a proxy for the mirror neuron system (Hobson and Bishop 2017), with greater mu suppression taken to reflect greater empathy.

Despite the great promise of applying neuroscientific methods to socio-cognitive tasks, and their particular advantage of enabling an implicit measure of empathic responses that makes minimal demands on other cognitive resources, there remain significant challenges in their use. Most importantly, neuroimaging and electrophysiological methods aim to identify psychological processes by observing the brain's activity during specific tasks. However, since psychological processes are often poorly defined and not directly observable, researchers face the 'reverse inference' problem; they need to infer the engagement of specific socio-cognitive processes based on observed patterns of brain function (Poldrack 2006). Thus, the presence of psychological states (including empathy) or identification of mechanisms that might influence how they are manifested is typically inferred by mapping the activation of specific brain areas or ERP modulations onto those that have been observed in previous studies of related mental functions. Identifying these links does not tell us whether the brain response is necessary for the brain function, or the degree of specificity with which it is activated by the psychological process in question. In addition, the existence and nature of a mirror neuron system to support higher-level social processing has been disputed in the literature, with some researchers arguing that its role is limited to action understanding (e.g. Catmur et al. 2018).

Two alternative physiological measures that have been used to assess affective empathy are *eye-tracking*, which uses a camera-based technology to track the focus of people's gaze and their pupil size, and *facial electromyography* (EMG), which records facial muscle activity as a measure of emotional mimicry. Eye-tracking research has revealed that when engaged in a face-to-face conversation, highly empathic people focus their gaze more frequently on their conversation partner's eye region than people with a low disposition for empathy (Klin et al. 2002). In addition, a higher level of affective empathy is thought to influence pupil diameter, as observers show larger pupil size when watching a video of an actor telling a sad (versus neutral) story (Cowan et al. 2014). This is because pupil dilation, among other things, depends on a person's emotional arousal (Sirois and Brisson 2014) – the higher one's arousal, the bigger the size of the pupil. Therefore, it is reasoned that if someone empathises with another person, the resulting increase of emotional arousal should be accompanied by greater pupil



dilation (cf. Michalska et al. 2013). EMG research has revealed that observers mimic the expression of happy or angry faces, and that the relevant muscle contractions are greater among more empathic individuals (Dimberg et al. 2011), which suggests that they may be more sensitive to the emotions of others. Of course, eye-tracking and EMG measures suffer from similar ‘reverse inference’ problems to those discussed for neuroscientific methods; therefore, further work is needed to fully understand how they map onto real-world behaviours and processes.

### **Distinguishing self and other empathy responses**

As previously noted, empathy includes two crucial components: that we experience an affective state that is isomorphic to the affective state of the person we are observing or imagining (i.e. a shared state), and that we can distinguish our own affective state from that of the other person (de Vignemont and Singer 2006). The latter is particularly important to ensure that our own affective state does not bias how we empathise with others, and that we do not experience excessive personal distress when empathising with others. For example, Silani et al. (2013) showed that when two participants experienced simultaneous – but differently valenced – affective touch, their judgements of the other person’s affective touch was biased by the valence of their own egocentric experience of affective touch. Similarly, behavioural and neuroimaging data converge to show that being prompted to imagine the pain and distress of another person leads to higher empathic concern but lower personal distress than projecting oneself into a painful situation (Lamm et al. 2007). Indeed, when a negative story evokes high levels of personal distress in the self, this disrupts the ability to recognise emotions in the storyteller (Israelashvili et al. 2019).

The ability to distinguish the self and others is necessary across various domains of social-cognitive processing, including representations of mental states of others that conflict with our own (Spengler et al. 2009) and inhibition of automatic imitation tendencies (Wang and Hamilton 2012). A meta-analysis showed that these processes activate the same areas of the temporal parietal cortex as empathy (Decety and Lamm 2007) and rely on related networks of executive function skills, particularly inhibitory control (Ruby and Decety 2003). Research that has investigated impairments in empathy in socio-cognitive conditions has revealed that psychopaths elicit atypical brain responses to the pain of others, though these can be activated when explicitly instructed to empathise with others (Decety et al. 2013; Meffert et al. 2013). In addition, the difficulties that some autistic individuals report empathising with others have been attributed to high levels of alexithymia, reflecting a difficulty understanding and identifying their own emotions (Bird et al. 2010). Offering a contrast to this view, Milton et al. (this volume) make the point that most measurements of empathy fail to acknowledge relationality and the role of autistic individuals in constructing



social reality and thus being part of society and processes of socialisation. Taken together, there is compelling evidence that empathy operates as part of a broader network of social-cognitive abilities, with the self-other distinction at their heart.

A key question in the literature concerns the degree to which we empathise with others automatically, or whether certain contextual features modulate the selectivity of this response. Numerous studies have reported that empathy neural networks are activated even when participants have not been prompted to engage these responses. For example, Singer et al. (2004) found overlapping brain activation in the empathy/pain brain network when participants experienced a painful stimulus themselves and when they observed an arbitrary cue that indicated their loved one was receiving the same painful stimulus (i.e. ruling out the possibility that the effect was driven by a general response to an emotional cue). Nevertheless, given the range of complex environments and interaction situations that we engage in during everyday life, an automatic system for empathising that activates regardless of need would be too demanding on our emotional resources and would disrupt our own affective experiences. In the next section, we will consider the conditions under which our empathic responses are subject to contextual appraisal, in particular how they are modulated by qualities of the ‘other’ (including radically different qualities, as well as similarity or familiarity to the self).

### **Empirical insights on empathising with (radical) others**

Some of the most striking evidence that emotional responses to the pain of others can be modulated by the relationship between the self and other comes from studies that show increasing empathic responses to the pain of others with increasing self/other overlap. Riečanský et al. (2020) compared empathy responses to videos of a hand being penetrated by a sharp needle when the visuo-spatial position of the target hand either overlapped or not with the position of the participant’s own hand. Results showed that empathy-related EEG mu suppression was stronger when the self and other bodily representations overlapped, and these responses were strongest among participants who self-reported high levels of bodily self-attribution to the other hand. In another study, Cialdini et al. (1997) reported that perceived ‘oneness’ between the self and other is an important predictor of helping behaviour, and this correlates strongly with empathic concern.

In line with this, a large body of evidence now supports the idea that empathy responses are influenced by the social group membership of the person in distress (e.g. Hein et al. 2010; Lübke et al. 2020), including the degree to which people feel that the other person is similar or familiar to them. For example, studies have recorded EEG or fMRI whilst observers viewed images of either a needle (painful) or a cotton swab (non-painful) being pressed into a hand. Critically, participants were told that the hand either

belonged to someone similar to them, or to a dissimilar patient who had a neurological condition that meant they experienced counterintuitive pain reactions (i.e. no pain to the needle and pain to the cotton swab). Results revealed heightened pain responses to the non-painful stimuli in the dissimilar hand condition, showing that participants adopted the perspective of the dissimilar other to 'feel' their pain. Nevertheless, people show stronger facial mimicry of empathic emotions, such as sadness, to in-group members (Bourgeois and Hess 2008), and out-group membership status can compromise empathic and prosocial behaviours towards others (Neumann et al. 2013). Even when the group membership between self and other is stable, the social context of an interaction can elicit differential empathy responses to others. For example, observing a competitor's joy results in feelings of distress, but their pain leads to positive emotions (Lanzetta and Englis 1989). This pattern reveals an important and often overlooked aspect of empathy – that it can be used maliciously, particularly towards radical others.

Interestingly, empathy is not limited to human others. Research has revealed that humans show empathy for animals; they experience affective physiological responses to animal suffering that is comparable (though weaker) to that elicited when viewing human suffering (Franklin et al. 2013). Empathy for animals is also influenced by an individual's increasing experience with animals and nature (Young et al. 2018), likely since this expands their understanding of non-human entities and arouses anthropomorphic projections towards them (i.e. increases similarity), as well as ontological orientations that understand human/animal differentiations differently, attributing personhood to non-human beings (see Mezzenzana, Peluso, this volume). Moreover, the empathy of humans for animals is not universally applied across all species. Species that exhibit physical, behavioural, or cognitive similarities with humans are more likely to elicit positive affect than those which are more dissimilar (Harrison and Hall 2010; Prguda and Neumann 2014). In addition, people who perceive animals to be highly dissimilar to humans and lacking mental attributes are less likely to have empathy for their suffering, and more likely to consume meat (Loughnan et al. 2014).

Finally, recognising empathy for even more radical 'others', research has begun to explore affective responses towards inanimate objects, including with robots (see Kory-Westlund, this volume). Rosenthal-von der Pütten et al. (2014) found that videos depicting humans and robots being treated affectionately or violently both elicited self-report and neural evidence for empathy. However, differential empathy responses were found for the abusive videos, indicating that humans feel stronger empathic concern and emotional distress for humans than for robots. It has been proposed that the degree of human likeness influences emotional responses to inanimate robots and other objects. However, once a certain degree of human similarity is reached, an 'uncanny valley' effect emerges (Mori et al. 2012), where observers suddenly feel repulsed by the robot as they oscillate between the incompatible perception of an inanimate object and a 'human feeling' (Mieselhorn 2009).

## Using imagination to promote empathy and prosocial behaviour towards radical others

In this final section of the chapter, we will explore the extent to which empathy and prosocial behaviours towards others in the real world can be influenced by imagination. We will look at the characteristics of imagination that determine its impact on actual attitudes and behaviour, discuss the relationship between imagination and empathy, and the conditions under which imagination may lead to greater empathy, also for radical others (see also Hollan, this volume). Finally, we will review types of imaginative activities, ranging from informal everyday activities to formalised interventions, that have been associated with benefits for empathy or prosocial behaviour. This will include an emphasis on attitudes and behaviours towards radical others.

Imagination is a fundamental human capacity allowing us to mentally simulate actions and events that are not currently happening (Crisp and Turner 2012). Through imagination, we can rehearse future scenarios and test out effects of hypothetical actions – also social ones – without potentially damaging real-life consequences (Gaesser 2013; Gaesser and Fowler 2020; Narvaez and Mrkva 2014). Thus, imagination can serve planning of goal-directed behaviour, self-regulation, and ultimately behaviour change (Crisp and Turner 2012). There is also evidence to suggest that imagining events increases the perceived realism of these events – known as the *imagination inflation* effect (Gaesser 2013) – and that imagining actions boosts real-life performance of these actions (Cross et al. 2017). It seems that imagining an event makes the event more accessible, which partly accounts for the relation between imagination and reality (Gaesser et al. 2018). The assumption that imaginations are vital for *social* cognition and behaviour is supported by observations showing that most of the imaginations humans engage in spontaneously are about social events and interactions (Gaesser and Fowler 2020; Narvaez and Mrkva 2014).

Empathy has frequently been associated with imagination, too. Perhaps the most elaborate attempts at defining empathy have emphasised that typically, affective empathy is not actually sharing the emotional states of others, but *imagining* the emotional state that one assumes another person to be in (Batson 2014; Persson and Savulescu 2018). Empirical support for the assumption that types of imagination promote empathy comes from studies into empathic accuracy – that is, the ability to correctly deduce the undisclosed thoughts and feelings of another person (Myers and Hodges 2014). For instance, in a study by Lee et al. (2010), fantasy empathy – defined as tendency to transpose oneself imaginatively into the feelings and actions of fictitious characters – was associated with empathic accuracy. Similarly, Myers and Hodges (2014) in their review of empathic accuracy conclude that one of the key determinants of empathic accuracy is the ability to construct a consistent mental schema or representation of the other person. This ability relies on imagination.

Still, not every instance of imagination is linked with empathy, in its simplest form when what we imagine is not about other people's feelings; and some scholars have claimed that there can be empathy without imagination, for example when we infer someone's feelings based on situational circumstances (Morton 2017). It should also be noted that *spontaneous* empathy does not always lead to morally good outcomes, as it is biased in several ways (Persson and Savulescu 2018): we naturally tend to empathise with people who are both spatially and temporally near; whom we prefer for morally unrelated reasons such as being members of our own group or being cute; and who we can identify as discrete persons: humans do not seem to be able to feel empathy for groups of people in proportion to their number, so are biased towards single identified individuals. There is also some indirect evidence to suggest that imagination is involved in such biased empathy. More precisely, the identified victim effect – referring to the phenomenon that identifying people in need increases the willingness of donors to contribute to a charitable cause – has been found to operate via more coherent mental images and sympathy. In an experiment by Dickert et al. (2016), facing participants with identified rather than unidentified victims evoked more coherent mental images, and these more coherent mental images were associated with stronger sympathy, and ultimately greater donations towards identified victims. Nevertheless, it has been argued that humans can balance the biases of spontaneous empathy through reason, reflection, and directing their imagination to the right kind of objects (Persson and Savulescu 2018).

Regulating the focus of our imaginations has been thought to offer a means through which we can empathise with radical others, as well. Batson (2014) has distinguished two basic kinds of perspectives we can adopt to achieve empathic concern. First, taking the *imagine-other* perspective, one imagines how the other person perceives their situation, and how they feel as a result of this. Second, when taking the *imagine-self* perspective, one imagines how oneself would perceive the situation if one were in the other person's position, and how one would feel as result. Summarising the empirical evidence, Batson (2014) concludes that when there is sufficient information about the other person's suffering, and the other person does not appear to be disagreeable, people naturally tend to adopt the *imagine-other* perspective, which evokes empathic concern for the suffering person. In contrast, when there is only limited information on the other person's suffering, or when the other person does not seem to be in great need, people tend to adopt the *imagine-self* perspective. In other words, if we are not sure what is wrong with another person, we seem to imagine how we ourselves would feel and respond in the other person's situation. Although the *imagine-self* perspective might not accurately reveal the other person's mental state and can cause personal distress in addition to empathic concern, it can provide an initial stepping stone for empathising with someone who we do not know well. This makes the *imagine-self* perspective a means to approach empathy with radical others.

Based on these findings, a range of imagination-related activities have been developed with the potential to benefit empathy and/or prosociality towards out-group members, including radical others. Children naturally engage in pretend play, during which they imagine themselves to be someone else (e.g. a knight), and also imagine objects to change their ontology (e.g. when a banana is imagined to be a phone). Extensive claims that pretend play in general fosters the social skills of children are not supported by the current evidence base (Lillard et al. 2013). Similarly, Davis et al. (2014) observed that children who had an imaginary companion (IC) compared with children without an IC more often mentioned mental characteristics when describing their real-world best friend. However, children with an IC did not demonstrate superiority regarding ToM performance, prosocial behaviour, and behavioural difficulties.

Reading is another imagination-related activity. When we read narratives, we construct a mental representation of the events described within the text (Zwaan 1999); that is, we perform an act of imagination. Since texts provide a scaffold for what to imagine, reading is considered a guided form of imagination (Green and Donahue 2014; Lillard 2013). The intensity of this imaginative experience has been thought to depend on transportation – the feeling of being immersed into the story world (Green and Donahue 2014). Due to the content of narratives, which is typically mostly social in nature, and the importance of emotions for many narratives, reading stories (also fictional ones) has been proposed as an avenue to foster social-cognitive abilities including empathy and prosocial behaviour (Johansen 2010; Mar 2018; Mar and Oatley 2008; see also Vaage, this volume). There is some evidence to suggest that for young children not yet able to read, such benefits can be achieved through shared storybook reading (Kohm et al. 2016). Regarding empathetic and prosocial behaviour towards radical others in adults, two experiments have reported positive effects on attitudes towards Arab Muslims in the United States, where Islamophobic tendencies have been on the rise (Johnson et al. 2013). Similarly, see Wanner and Pavlenko (this volume) who explore Ukrainians empathising toward Russians in a postwar context.

Further studies have observed benefits for attitudes towards animals (Beierl 2008; Małecki et al. 2016, 2019). However, in general, there is inconclusive evidence as to whether reading stories, including fictional ones, affects empathy and prosociality. To explain a lack of findings, it has been proposed that the empathic skills exercised through reading fiction stories are different from the empathic skills required for real-world interactions (Langkau 2020), and that the guided format of imagination employed during reading restricts the unfolding of imagination's full potential (West and Somer 2020) so that writing stories may be more effective than reading (Brill 2004).

In our everyday lives, during times when we are not busy with a particular task, we frequently engage in daydreaming where we immerse ourselves in more or less fantastic imaginings. Aspects of habitual daydreaming



have been linked with affective empathy for fictional characters (West and Somer 2020). In an experiment by Poerio et al. (2016), daydreaming about a significant other after a loneliness induction led to heightened feelings of love, connection, and belonging, and increased helping behaviour. However, positive fantasies can also have detrimental effects on prosocial behaviour. Kappes et al. (2013) showed that positive fantasies about the resolution of a humanitarian crisis reduced the willingness of individuals to donate a relatively large amount of resources, but did not affect their willingness to donate a relatively small amount. Put another way, when supporting the resolution of a crisis is resource demanding, positive fantasies dampen helping, whereas positive fantasies do not affect helping when few resources are required.

Another type of action we carry out on a daily basis, often without being aware of it, are coordinated rhythmic movements (CRMs). These occur when we coordinate our behaviour with others via movements, gestures, and verbal communication (Cross et al. 2017). Cross and colleagues found out that mere imagining of CRMs can produce some of the prosocial benefits of actual CRMs. In particular, imagining CRMs promoted group cohesion and de-individuation, but did not consistently promote cooperation.

Episodic simulation is an activity we might not regularly engage in during our everyday lives, at least not in a formal way; however, humans evidently can perform episodic simulation, which legitimises its use in structured interventions. Gaesser (2013) and Gaesser et al. (2018) defined episodic simulation as vividly imagining personal events in a specific time and place. In a typical episodic simulation intervention, participants are presented with short scenarios about a person in need (Gaesser et al. 2015). Subsequently, they must imagine a detailed event in which they help this person. Episodic simulation has been found to increase willingness to help others (Gaesser et al. 2015), as well as actual helping behaviour (Gaesser et al. 2018); it has also been linked with enhanced affective empathy in healthy younger adults (Sawczak et al. 2019; Vollberg et al. 2021). Episodic simulation may be effective for promoting empathy and prosocial behaviour towards radical others, too, since it has been found to reduce the gap in prosociality between in- and out-groups (Gaesser et al. 2020).

Finally, an intervention approach explicitly designed to promote tolerance for and more positive relations with out-groups is imagined intergroup contact (Crisp and Turner 2009). Imagined contact is an extension of Allport's (1954) contact hypothesis. Whilst the contact hypothesis assumes that social contact between different groups has the potential to improve intergroup relations, the imagined contact hypothesis postulates that simply imagining such contact leads to the same sorts of outcomes (Crisp and Turner 2012). During a typical imagined contact intervention, attendees are asked to imagine meeting a member of a specific out-group for the first time. The imagined interaction is intended to be positive, relaxed, and comfortable. A quantitative synthesis of over 70 studies revealed that imagined



contact effectively reduces intergroup bias in terms of attitudes, emotions, intentions, and behaviour (Miles and Crisp 2014).

## Conclusions

In this chapter, we have considered the multi-faceted nature of empathy as a psychological concept, including affective components of emotional contagion and cognitive components that link with Theory of Mind. We then introduced a wide range of tasks and measures that have been used to examine empathy in human participants, and critically appraised their limitations and potential. Distinguishing the self-other was highlighted as a key process for empathy; evidence from intergroup psychology, as well as research on animals and robots, was discussed to interrogate how the degree of shared social context between the self and other influences empathy responses. Finally, we have reflected on how imagination might modulate empathy and prosocial behaviours towards others, including various imagination-related intervention activities, and conclude that episodic simulation and imagined contact provide the most promising evidence for benefits on attitudes and behaviours towards out-groups. However, whether these activities are also effective for empathising with radical others is an unanswered question and deserves targeted investigation.

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## 4 Autism and the ‘double empathy problem’

*Damian E. M. Milton, Krysia Emily Waldoock,  
and Nathan Keates*

### **Introduction**

Since the term autism first entered common clinical usage, the notion that autistic people were somehow deficient in their social interaction and communication has been central to how it has been conceptualised and diagnosed, those so diagnosed thus being commonly represented as radically different from non-autistic people.<sup>1</sup> From the ‘machine-like’ metaphor adopted by Hans Asperger (Milton 2014), through the ‘empty shell’ of Bruno Bettelheim (1967), to the ‘triad of impairments’ as outlined by Lorna Wing and Judith Gould (1979), one can see an emphasis on defining autism in terms of a lack of social reciprocity. Deficits in social interaction, social communication, and – according to some – ‘social imagination’ have thus become an embedded framework in diagnostic criteria and tools for distinguishing autistic people from subjects with normative development. Perhaps the most dominant cognitive theory that has attempted to explain these issues has been that of a deficit in ‘theory of mind’ and variations thereof such as ‘empathising-systemising’ theory and the theory of the ‘extreme male brain’ (Baron-Cohen 2003). Theory of mind refers to the ability to imagine the thoughts and feelings of others, in order to comprehend and predict their behaviour. For Baron-Cohen (2003) autistic people show a lack of theory of mind or ‘cognitive empathy’ (the ability to infer mental states and predict the behaviour of others) while being able to feel ‘affective empathy’ (emotional reciprocity) and emotional sympathy when made aware of the situation and context. Baron-Cohen (2003) also theorises that whilst autistic people may have deficits in ‘empathising’, they can have strengths in what is referred to as ‘systemising’ – the ability to identify the rules and patterns that govern a system in order to predict how that system or network will behave. This difference is said to be due to elevated levels of foetal testosterone in early development and postulated as a reason for higher diagnostic rates among males.

In more recent years, we have seen a growing number of criticisms of conceptualising autism as a social/empathic deficit (Milton 2012a, 2012b, 2014; Yergeau 2013; Gernsbacher and Yergeau 2019; Nicolaidis et al.

2018). The deficit model of autistic social interaction fails to acknowledge relationality and how social reality is constantly reconstructed and contested by social agents, often representing the autistic person as lacking agency, of being somehow outside of society and processes of socialisation, and therefore outside of 'normalised' concepts of empathy. This notion of autistic people as being in deficit is reinforced by a variety of theories and accompanying narratives in relation to their sociality and interaction, whereby autistic people are framed as lacking a theory of mind (Baron-Cohen et al. 1985), lacking in empathy (Baron-Cohen et al. 2002) and being 'mindblind' (Baron-Cohen 1995). Particularly of note are the assertions that a theory of mind is a 'quintessential aspect of being human' (Baron-Cohen 2000, p. 3) and that autistic people are unable to empathise (Baron-Cohen et al. 2002). Assumptions surrounding what constitutes 'empathising' and 'systemising', and their association with specific genders and gender roles (Sample 2013), has led to critique and debate on the usefulness of this concept when applied to autistic people. Empathising in relation to autistic people has been defined as 'having an appropriate emotional reaction to another person's thoughts and feelings' (Baron-Cohen 2009). Questions remain as to who defines an 'appropriate' emotional response. Although some may link empathising with affective empathy (Davis 1994), social norms may contribute to what may be considered 'appropriate' in terms of the appropriateness of an emotional response. Discussions of 'appropriateness of emotional response' run the risk of radically othering social actors from different lifeworlds, through situating the interactional onto the individual – in this case, the autistic individual who sits at a disempowered position (Milton 2016).

Systemising has been described as the drive to analyse or construct systems – any kind of system (Baron-Cohen 2009). Although this is an attempt to give a more 'strengths-based approach' to autistic cognition, with the understanding that autistic people may spot patterns or collect information on certain topics, systemising when paired with a deficit in empathising as a dichotomy, moves away from a 'strengths-based approach'. Through pairing such different tasks and processing together as a dichotomy, this produces an appearance of a polarised dichotomy between empathising and 'systemising'. Furthermore, associations of lacking empathy and increased systemising have resulted in theorising of an 'Extreme Male Brain' (EMB) (Baron-Cohen 2002). This theory has been labelled as essentialist and reductionist (Ridley 2019), with critique of a 'gendered schema' (Krahn and Fenton 2012), disempowering autistic people through reducing autistic brains to that of 'extreme male brains'.

Whilst we agree that it is true that autistic people, particularly when young, can struggle to process and understand the 'quick-fire' social interactions which many non-autistic people take for granted, we want to ask the following questions. To what extent do such interactions require empathy? What do we mean when we talk of empathy? Where does the ability to predict the thoughts and actions of others reside? To what extent do

non-autistic people acquire a ‘theory of autistic mind’? How do such ways of viewing autism produce oversimplified dehumanising and stigmatising narratives? Drawing upon both personal experience of being autistic and a parent to an autistic child, as well as theory and relevant interdisciplinary research, this chapter will explore these questions, arguing that such a way of framing autism and empathy is deeply problematic. The theory of the ‘double empathy problem’ and relevant related research will be described, which suggests that rather than a deficit solely located in the mind of the autistic person, during empathetic engagements breakdowns in reciprocity and mutual understanding can occur, especially between people of very differing dispositions.

### **So what exactly is empathy, anyway?**

Definitions of empathy relate to a breadth of cognitive and subjective states, often as Baron-Cohen (2003) indicates, split into ‘cognitive’ and ‘affective’ empathy. In contrast to psychopathy and narcissism, which are often characterised as resulting from deficits in affective empathy, autism (alongside bipolar disorder and borderline personality disorder) have been linked to a deficit in cognitive empathy. More recently, it has been suggested that autistic people may struggle with ‘alexithymia’, which indicates an impairment in understanding, processing, and describing one’s own emotions, potentially affecting on one’s ability to recognise or mirror those of other people (Cook et al. 2013).

Whilst much theorising of empathy resides within the discipline of psychology, which often leaves the social context of empathy unaccounted for, it is worth taking a broader view of the enactment of empathy (or not) within social contexts. Whilst it is true that people tend to show affective empathic reactions to people they love and care about deeply, this often becomes less the case the further away from such attachments a person may have with others. The work of Tajfel et al. (1979), for example, shows how empathic reactions were heightened toward those considered part of one’s own social ‘in-group’ and lowered in interactions with people perceived as members of an ‘out-group’. From this broader social perspective, one may wish to question perhaps that the framing of autism as a lack of (cognitive) empathy may indeed itself be symptomatic of a lack of empathy (both cognitive and affective) toward autistic people and their way of being (or form of life: Chapman 2019). If the theory of an autistic deficit were true, then it would follow that non-autistic people would not struggle to empathise and understand autistic behaviour, as they would not hold such a deficit. And yet, there are numerous conferences, books, and articles produced every year attempting to help explain the ‘enigma’ (Frith 2003) of autism. One may then legitimately ask if this framing of autism as an enigma is revealing of some sort of empathetic deficit on the part of non-autistic people toward autistic people. When considering affective empathy, then, one may wish to

view it on a scale that also includes apathy and antipathy toward the experiences of others, and what Cameron (2012) described as 'dyspathy' (the lack of employing empathy toward others). One might even suggest that the whole notion of emotional empathy is somewhat of a convenient illusion (Milton 2012a) constructed so that we feel less alone and isolated in our existential angst. In a psychotherapeutic setting, Holland (this volume) identifies the limitations and dynamical ecologies of empathy (i.e., what once was an empathic gesture may not be recalled as such later) and supports the view that rather than being straightforward – even among non-autistic people – empathy is a fraught process, subject to emotional fluctuations and incomprehension.

## **The disposition of an outsider**

### *Damian*

I was diagnosed as being on the autism spectrum in 2009 at the age of 36. This was following my son's diagnosis some years earlier at the age of 2. Like many others of my generation or older, the broader autism 'spectrum' as a concept had not been applied to me until well into adulthood. When I was younger, there had been numerous psychiatric professionals who had their own pet theories as to what was 'wrong with Damian' (Milton 2013), but autism was not a conceptual framework I had to work with until I was introduced to it in relation to my son. From as far back as I remember, I have felt as something of a social outsider, struggling to navigate the school environment and peer groups, and then relationships and workplaces in later life. In my young adulthood, I had passively rebelled and 'dropped out' to the fringes of social life and was soon considered 'long-term unemployed' with few prospects. It was during this time that I discovered the philosophical work of Robert Pirsig (1974, 1991) and began my own explorations into the 'qualia' of lived experience. It was perhaps here that such theorising and reflection on my own experiences as a misunderstood outsider were where the foundations of what was to later be understood the concept of the 'double empathy problem' were first laid out for me. My own experiences seemed to be more locked into the 'dynamic quality' of the sensory world that Pirsig referred to than those of others. The feeling of sharing of 'qualia' reported on by others was but a rarity to me.

By the mid-1990s, I had begun to delve into the disciplines of sociology and philosophy, and had begun my second attempt at a degree course. It was here that I came across the work of Thomas Nagel and in particular the article: 'What is it like to be a bat?' (Nagel 1974). For me, it was of course impossible to have any idea what it was like to be another person, let alone a bat. I also read the seminal works of Erving Goffman (1956, 1963), Howard Becker (1963), Harold Garfinkel (1967), and others who were to become central figures in my own theoretical work for years to come. By

the late 1990s, I had been influenced by the work of disability scholars and radical psychiatrists, and begun to theorise about how people were uniquely constructed materially, socially, and discursively, yet within power relationships whereby some dispositions were deemed pathological disorders and others within the normative range:

Extremes of any combination come to be seen as ‘psychiatric deviance’. In the argument presented here, where disorder begins is entirely down to social convention, and where one decides to draw the line across the spectrum [spectrum referring to the ‘human spectrum of dispositional diversity’].

(Milton 1999, cited in Milton 2017, p. 32)

At this time, I spoke of a ‘human spectrum of dispositional diversity’, whilst unaware of the notion of an ‘autism spectrum’ or that the Australian sociologist Judy Singer had coined the term ‘neurodiversity’ (Singer 2017). For me, this dispositional diversity was not fixed or static, nor completely fluid, but changeable nonetheless, albeit for each person within certain somatic affordances and bodily limitations, with attributions of a disordered disposition being the somewhat arbitrary decisions of those with power in society to shape how less powerful others are perceived. When my son and then I were diagnosed as autistic in the first decade of the 2000s and I came across the dominant theories for explaining autism, it was inevitable that I would find the theory of mind deficit hypothesis to be partial at best.

### *Kryisia*

I was diagnosed as autistic at the age of 3 in 1995, and a second time at the age of 13 in 2005. Two main things have followed me throughout my life as an autistic person: the persistent feeling of being an outsider, which led to a PhD exploring belonging for autistic people, and particularly ‘outsiderness’ within communication and salience. I was always ‘getting the wrong end of the stick’ or being told I am ‘misinterpreting things’, placing me into the position of the deficiated individual, however hard I tried. Even studying two foreign languages left me as a ‘perennial outsider’, with my autistic nature being misunderstood by both the French university system and my former German employers. The narratives I had been fed, and those my parents had been fed, were those framing autistic people as ‘lacking theory of mind’, and not considering the bidirectional nature of communication. Socially situating me as the ‘outsider’, paired with narratives of ‘lacking a theory of mind’, further ostracised me from having my own agency and built the idea that I should perceive myself as having less value than others.

Theory of mind (Baron-Cohen et al. 1985), as previously stated, frames autistic people as ‘lacking a theory of mind’. Theory of mind in the case of the argument of Baron-Cohen et al. (1985) assumes a ‘sameness’ in theory



of mind of interlocutors, with the theory of mind being used in social and discursive situations. A positioning of a lack of theory of mind onto one individual when there is a breakdown in reciprocity, notably of the theory of mind in this case, creates otherness through the lack of a 'sameness', like in Tajfel and Turner (1979), and Turner (1989). The deficit framing of theory of mind in autistic people creates the illusion of empathy being built on having a theory of mind, and therefore an assumption of 'sameness' between social agents. Those who fall outside the parameters of this sameness – or those who fall at the extremes of dispositional diversity (Milton 1999, cited in Milton 2017, p. 32) – may be considered as socially deviant (Goffman 1963), with the 'flaw' of a lack of empathy being likely to be socially stigmatised. Othering autistic people not only stigmatises them, but it also casts them as 'non-moral agents'. In addition, framing empathy as a construct with moral implications has the consequence of making autistic people as the 'immoral other': stigmatised and deviant on account of perceived moral failings. The implications of presenting autistic people in this manner are numerous, leading to ethical quandaries regarding interventions done to autistic people (e.g., in reference to social skills training; Bambara et al. 2021; and in response Keates 2022) and questions on the political nature of being autistic in society and social groups (e.g., Waldock 2021).

### **The double empathy problem – a growing evidence base**

The original published definition of the double empathy problem is as follows:

A disjuncture in reciprocity between two differently disposed social actors which becomes more marked the wider the disjuncture in dispositional perceptions of the lifeworld – perceived as a breach in the 'natural attitude' of what constitutes 'social reality' for 'neuro-typical' people and yet an everyday and often traumatic experience for 'autistic people'.  
(Milton 2012a, p. 884)

Due to differing qualia of experience, social lifeworlds, dispositional viewpoints and discursive repertoires, interactions between autistic and non-autistic people are vulnerable to breaches in mutual understanding, framed as a 'double problem' as both parties in the interaction will experience a sense of disjuncture, not simply a deficit in the autistic person's mind. Whilst this experience may be novel for many non-autistic people, it is commonplace for autistic people. Such a framing would also suggest a greater likelihood of feelings of empathy between autistic people with one another and with those they have close relationships with, yet perhaps over differing elements of their lives.

Whilst the double empathy problem was initially proposed based upon personal introspection and qualitative accounts (Milton 2017), we have seen

in recent years a growing body of experimental research that is supportive of the double empathy problem theory (Milton et al. 2020). Sheppard et al. (2016) researched how well non-autistic people could interpret the mental states of autistic people within naturalistic settings. They found that non-autistic people were less able to guess an event that a person being recorded was responding to if they were autistic, apart from when the reactions were to a joke. Edey et al. (2016) asked participants to use two triangles to depict mental states within an interaction such as ‘mocking’. Non-autistic participants were better able to decipher the mental states being depicted of animations that had been created by other non-autistic people compared to those created by autistic participants.

There are physiological similarities between non-autistic and autistic dyads found by Stevanovic et al. (2019) whereby both neurotypes require dominance within a social exchange to experience ‘calm’ (autonomic nervous system). Stevanovic and colleagues suggest that it is the non-autistic interlocutor that creates the ‘trouble’ within the cross-neurotype dyads, which supports the theory of cross-neurotype differential socialisation. Furthermore, Stevanovic and colleagues suggest that autistic people have increased affective empathy, due to the non-autistic sample providing extensive emotionally relevant information leading to ‘socio-emotional overflow’.

In a study looking at first impressions, Stagg et al. (2014) found that non-autistic people rated autistic children as less expressive and attractive than non-autistic children based on short recordings of them. Sasson et al. (2017) found that non-autistic people rated autistic adults and children less favourably than non-autistic people in a range of measures and a reduced rating for the intention to interact with them. This was replicated by Alkhaldi et al. (2019) and Scheerer et al. (2022), extending the findings across multiple situations. Sasson and Morrison (2019) also found, however, that by providing information to participants regarding the diagnosis of autism, autistic people were rated more favourably. Of course, such knowledge and shift in attitudes may not be mirrored in people’s actions in everyday life. Of interest is that a favourable first impression of autistic people may exist when text-based and not through video (Cage and Burton 2019).

Utilising the same recordings from Sasson et al. (2017) and Sasson and Morrison (2019), Sasson et al. (2018) investigated metaperceptions between autistic and non-autistic people. Participants were asked how they thought others would perceive them, and this was compared to how observers did on a range of personality traits. In this study, autistic people overestimated how positively they would be seen by others. Whilst this study looked into how people thought they would be perceived by others in general, Usher et al. (2018) studied the perceptions of dyads of young people where one of the pairing was autistic and one not who engaged in a five-minute conversation. In this study, autistic participants were more accurate than non-autistic people at judging whether the other liked them or not.

In a study by Heasman and Gillespie (2018), Interpersonal Perception Methodology was utilised to examine the perceptions and misperceptions of dyads made up of autistic people and their family members. Both autistic people and their family members predicted that the other would rate them differently than they would themselves on a range of traits. Both groups were, however, fairly accurate in estimating the perceptions of each other. When asked for reasons for misunderstandings between them, however, family members tended to use a narratives of impairment in autistic understanding of the social world, whilst autistic participants reflected on both themselves and their family members as potential causes of misunderstandings. Such evidence suggests that autistic people do not have a deficit in metaperception and theory of mind at a fundamental level, and such framings could be adding to the misperceptions of others, including those in a close relationship to the autistic person.

Gernsbacher et al. (2017) suggest that there is a disjuncture in how autistic and non-autistic people view themselves in relation to one another, in that autistic people report fewer 'autistic traits' when the reference for questions is the perception of other autistic people. Heasman and Gillespie (2019a) studied 30 interactions between autistic adults playing video games that focused upon intersubjectivity and shared understanding. The findings from this research suggested a particular kind of social coordination that occurred between the autistic participants, where there was a tendency to give detailed descriptions and have a low expectation for a tight coordination of interaction. In another study by Heasman and Gillespie (2019b), a video game scenario was used to test metaperception whereby non-autistic participants were led to believe they were interacting with another player online to navigate a maze, whilst they were actually interacting with an AI programme. The AI was given differing diagnostic statuses: autistic, dyslexic, or none. When the AI was thought to be autistic, the AI was viewed as more intelligent but less helpful. Participants also believed that they were being more helpful but without any behavioural evidence to suggest that this was so. These studies suggest that stereotyped views of autistic people are likely to contribute to the double empathy problem, and that there may also be differences between people's perceptions of being helpful and actually being so to others.

In recent research by Crompton et al. (2020), the transfer of information between people were studied across a diffusion chain of eight people in total, similar to a game of 'telephone'. When there were only autistic participants or only non-autistic participants, there was equally good transfer of information. However, when there was a mixed diffusion chain of autistic and non-autistic people, there was a much greater reduction in information successfully passed on.

Further research reflects the 'double empathy problem' resulting in social breakdowns within a given group. The dominant form of sociality could

be suggested to be based on social group identification and dominated by non-autistic people. The basis of autistic socialisation is interest-based (Bertilsson-Rosqvist 2019). The mismatch of social form and enacting the necessary mode (interest-led versus social alignment) may hinder the flow of the group and ultimately result in social exclusion. The analysis of bloggers' posts indicate a 'double empathy problem' through the disparity of metaperception and the consequential impact (Welch et al. 2022). There are real-life applications of the double empathy problem across settings and dimensions, such as in the criminal justice system (Holloway et al. 2020), education (Hummerstone and Parsons 2021), employment and job interviews (Maras et al. 2021; Remington and Pellicano 2019), and even the daily dissonance of the autistic lived experience (e.g., impression management: Cage and Troxell-Whitman 2019; Cook et al. 2021; Schneid and Raz 2020; understanding the use of gaming: Pavlopoulou et al. 2022) that may include 'thwarted belonging' and lead to suicidality (Cassidy et al. 2018; Pelton et al. 2020), and breakdowns in feelings of social inclusion and belonging between autistic and non-autistic individuals (Waldock et al. 2021). In a study by Chen et al. (2021), natural peer interactions among six autistic and six non-autistic young people were observed over a five-month period to examine peer preferences and real-world social interactions. The findings showed that the young people preferred within neurotype interactions and that such interactions were more reciprocal and relational (rather than instrumental), such as sharing thoughts and experiences.

The evidence is thus building to suggest that the theory of mind deficit theory of autism is indeed 'partial at best' with growing support for the double empathy problem. If autism is not a deficit in social understanding, then to what does the term autism refer? Atherton et al. (2019) have begun identifying an autistic theory of mind, proffering the desire for transparency (honesty), developed sense of humour necessitated by the social requirement to understand non-autistic sensibilities, use of sensory stories in creativity, and anthropomorphising non-human entities. Alongside the diagnostic criteria for social interaction and communication is what is often called 'repetitive behaviours and interests', also referred to (in all of the authors' opinion, incorrectly) as a deficit in 'social imagination'. Wing (1988) states that 'social imagination' deficits present as an inability to authentically understand other people's actions, which may be apparent in an autistic person's pretend play. Non-autistic people would have begun developing 'imaginative' social capabilities through copying their parents' physical expressions (i.e., face) at age 2 or 3. To us, it is such differences in embodied cognition and sociality which are key to understanding autism and thus also in understanding the double empathy problem. The socially situated nature of breakdowns in reciprocity, as suggested by the double empathy problem, and supported by the growing evidence outlined previously in this section, tentatively illustrates other factors which may be important in 'cross-neurotype' communication. The pervasiveness of discrimination and

exclusion and breakdowns in communicative reciprocity demonstrate the impact of the double empathy problem when enacted on a societal level, and breakdowns in communicative reciprocity on an interpersonal level. However, with the multitude of factors involved in communication, finding reconciliation is not a simple task.

The theory that perhaps has been dominant in terms of trying to explain the repetitive behaviours and interests observed in autistic people has been that of a deficit in 'executive functioning', referring to the ability to process new information and to remember and retrieve such information to use to solve problems and plan ahead. Whilst autistic people may show difficulties in some of these areas, an impairment in all of them in all contexts is more suspect. There is no doubt that the perceptual processing of new information is different, perhaps heightened or less filtered than for non-autistic people. Utilising relevant information from previous experience in the here and now may also prove difficult at times. Yet what of so-called autistic 'special interests', where such difficulties may be less prevalent or reduced? Another theory looking at such autistic differences is that of 'monotropism' or an interest model of autism (Murray 1992; Murray et al. 2005; Lawson 2010; Murray 2018). In this theory, attention is seen as a scarce resource whereby it is our interests that help to direct it with differing interests being salient at differing times. To a monotropic mind, fewer interests tend to be aroused at any one time, and they attract more processing resources, making it more difficult to engage one's attention outside of one's current focus. Disruptions to any such tunnelling allegedly lead to feelings of discombobulation, with mismatches in salience (Milton 2017) affecting breakdowns in mutual understanding. Similarly, Bolis et al. (2017) drew upon a combination of socio-cultural theories and Bayesian accounts to argue that consideration of psychiatric and neurological differences need to move beyond individualistic accounts and need to instead be considered as a dynamic interpersonal mismatch, utilising autism as a case example. This theory is thus for us completely in unison with that of the double empathy problem. Ai et al. (2022) also used Bayesian computational modelling to investigate impression management by autistic and non-autistic people. They suggest that autistic people face distinct computational challenges, yet these are inherently socially situated and transactional, and can also take a toll on autistic people in terms of social masking.

### **Empathy, morality, and power**

Kennet (2002) suggested that autistic people may lack moral competence (i.e., those compelled to action by reason are defined as conscious moral agents), even with those capable of passing false-belief tests and demonstrating theory of mind, through more subtle deficits in social understanding. Such speculation regarding autistic people and their moral agency further alienates and disempower autistic ways of being and subjective



introspective insights, including the production of knowledge that autistic people have about themselves (Milton and Bracher 2013; Milton 2014; Gillespie-Lynch et al. 2017), yet unfortunately is not uncommon that philosophical texts on this subject continue to perpetuate such ideas (see for instance, Bollard 2013).

The idea that moral agency is predicated on a symmetry between self and other and the ability to assume the other's point of view is a common belief (Benhabib 1991), yet was criticised by the feminist theorist Iris Marion Young (1997). In Young's theorising, it is neither possible nor desirable to possess a full understanding of the other (much as was argued previously in relation to the philosophy of Thomas Nagel) and instead suggests an approach highlighting 'asymmetrical reciprocity'. Young argues that 'equal treatment' of individual people will not override group-based social oppressions. Due to this inability to fully 'empathise' with the perspective of another, Young (1997) advocates for a position of humility and 'wonder' in interactions with others. In interactions with autistic people, we (authors DM and KW) would not be the only autistic people to be in full agreement with such a theoretical position and moral outlook. Combining the theorising of Young (1997) alongside the double empathy problem, questions are raised about to what degree moral agency' is gained through 'sameness' and 'symmetry' in interactions, with questions of power paramount.

Milton (2016) suggests that the power relationships that can form between autistic people and psych-professionals who may see their 'patients' as lacking in socialisation, empathy, moral competency, and even full humanity can produce forms of psycho-emotional disablement, constraining not only what people can do but also what they can be and become. In such interactions, one's own interpretations of oneself can be undermined by the 'expert knowledge' being applied to them, a case of 'psychsplaining'. Indeed, those questioning the moral competencies of autistic people may wish to question their own.

Another dimension to add in relation to power is that of intersectionality and how this intersects with power relationships between autistic people and other social agents in their milieu. As seen in other chapters in this edition, for example Özyürek (this volume) and Wanner and Pavlenko (this volume), mismatches in understanding also occur outside of the Anglophone environment, and as Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) argues, some social characteristics or identities can compound. As Waldock and Keates (2022) outline, this can further exacerbate disparities in interactions and lead to further psycho-emotional disablement and disempowerment.

### **Implications for working with autistic people**

Another significant influence on the theory of the double empathy problem has been the philosophy of George Herbert Mead (1934) and his distinction between the 'me' and the 'I'. According to Mead, the 'me' is learnt through



interactions in the social environment, comprised of the attitudes of others once internalised. The 'I', on the other hand, is a creative response to such attitudes and holds potential for social change. For Mead (1934), this relationship constitutes selfhood yet such influences can enter into a tension between selfhood or identity, and situated lifeworlds. When there are disparities between how one sees oneself and the views of others, this can lead to a potential crises in identity formation (Erikson 1968) and social stigma (Goffman 1963), affecting experiences of inclusion, belonging, and group membership amongst others and in group settings (Waldock et al. 2021), with potential resulting impacts on mental health. Therefore, the double empathy problem can affect very negatively on those who have limited power within social groups and society, such as a marginalised minority – notably, in this case, autistic people. In order to address such issues, it is therefore a requirement to examine not only micro-scale social interactions, but also the wider social and systemic contexts within which these interactions occur; for example, a young autistic person seeking an arts career that is radically othered by social agents, or the networking requirement within the wider cultural or creative industries (Buckley et al. 2021).

The implications of the double empathy problem for those supporting autistic people are widespread, and this has been shown in research looking at experiences of accessing health care generally (Doherty et al. 2022) and mental health care specifically (Mitchell et al. 2021). Mitchell et al. (2021) lend further support to the argument presented by Milton (2017) that the misperceptions and subsequent actions of the non-autistic majority can affect the self-impressions, identity, and mental health of autistic people. In their investigations of the nature of masking and impression management influenced by theory on the double empathy problem, Ai et al. (2022) highlight the need to change current practice models defined by an ethos of normative social skills building and the targeting of societal attitudes to reduce stigma.

In recent years, the concept of the double empathy problem has been incorporated into numerous established autism training programmes and support strategies. Strategies that target the social environment and actions of those around the autistic person have the potential to decrease the potential negative impact of the double empathy problem on autistic individuals. One example is the ATLASS training programme developed by Studio3 based within the 'low arousal approach' (first developed by McDonnell et al. 1994). According to McDonnell (2010), this approach contains four main elements: decreasing demands made of service users in order to reduce potential conflict, avoiding potential 'triggers' of unwanted stress, avoiding aggressive non-verbal behaviour by staff, and challenging staff beliefs about the 'management of challenging behaviour'. These elements clearly indicate the social situatedness of social interactions and the responsibility of all involved. The theory of the double empathy problem links well with such an approach. Another approach which has integrated the double empathy

problem is that of the Synergy programme developed by AT-Autism. This programme takes a broad view of building collaborative communities of practice, primarily within educational environments.

Amongst the autistic population, the co-occurrence of a range neurological conditions is often found, among which a significant minority also have learning disabilities. Whilst we would reject simplistic characterisations of mental functioning, there are often debates about the relevance of conceptualisations of autism and support strategies for those with significant learning disabilities particularly. Yet, if one follows the logic of the double empathy problem, such issues of mutual misunderstanding are only likely to increase in social interactions with those with limited verbal ability. Support strategies for autistic people with learning disabilities often strive for increased social integration and can be highly normative and looking to ‘remediate’ from a deficit-model perspective. Increasingly however, there have been strategies developed which concentrate more on rapport building and mutually fulfilling relationships, such as Intensive Interaction (Caldwell 2013) and parent-mediated communication-focused treatment (PACT) (Green et al. 2010). Such approaches recognise the significance of relationality as well as the perpetual making and remaking of social reality through social agents, acknowledging that the autistic person is an active agent who is not outside of society and its influence.

### **Future directions**

Whilst the evidence base for the double empathy problem is exponentially increasing, such research will improve understanding of the processes through which the problem arises, as well as potential support strategies to mitigate against its negative impacts. Social disjunctures have a great impact on quality of life, and work regarding social stigma and mental health can hopefully be informed by interactive and socially situated conceptualisation of the issues. Another area to explore further would be the role of culture or differing means of communication on amplifying or reducing the impact of the double empathy problem. This theorising also has practical relevance in a host of social situations, importantly (as one example) regarding the experiences autistic people have of employment practices. One only needs to think of the job interview scenario to see how disabling such social misunderstandings and judgements might be. The theory may also be able to illuminate understanding of autistic people who for one reason or another may need to engage with the criminal justice system. There is also the risk of potential harm and abuse occurring within the context of mutual misunderstandings within intimate relationships (Ridout and Hayward 2019).

Furthermore, the double empathy problem has implications for the way in which research regarding autism is carried out. Misunderstandings can easily occur between a researcher and a research participant (Milton

2014), and need to be carefully considered and mitigated against before any research takes place. Pellicano et al. (2014), for example, reported the existence of a mismatch between autistic (and family member) priorities for research and what kinds of research tends to be funded, wanting more of a practical focus on how to make an impact on everyday life and wellbeing. It is of great importance, therefore, for greater engagement of autistic people with the research process from topic selection to design and interpretation of findings (Milton and Bracher 2013; Milton 2014; Fletcher-Watson et al. 2019; Waldock and Keates 2022), thus calling for a more participatory process. Ultimately, the concept of the double empathy problem challenges the foundations of framing autism as a 'social deficit' located in the individual autistic person, and forcefully brings forth its broader social and interactional nature.

## Note

1 In keeping with other autistic self-advocates, this chapter will refer to 'autistic people' rather than 'people with autism'. Two of the three authors are autistic (DM and KW), and asserting our identity and positionality is key to the work we present.

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Part II

# Imagining others

Human interactions





# 5 Dynamics and vicissitudes of empathy

*Douglas Hollan*

Empathy is a notoriously difficult experience and concept to pin down exactly, being defined in different ways by different disciplines (Engelen and Rottger-Rossler 2012; Maibom 2014, 2017) and in different historical periods (Throop 2008; Throop and Zahavi 2020). However, in previous work (Hollan 2012, 2014a, 2017), I have argued that all “complex” forms of empathy – those that allow us to approximate *why* other people might be experiencing what they are, rather than the mere perceptual recognition *that* they are experiencing something – are mediated in important ways by a variety of social, cultural, political-economic, and moral processes. These contextual factors, which may amplify or suppress the tendency to empathize and which may shape whether empathy is used or not used to help or to harm, greatly influence the way any given individual in any given moment will attempt to empathize with another or not, and in what way.

Yet, our understandings of these highly dynamic and complex processes, especially as they unfold in naturally occurring behavior, are still quite limited. Some of this is due to the fact that our existing approaches to the study of empathic processes are themselves limited, different disciplines using methods and concepts that capture only a part or parts of the processes involved. For example, neurobiological approaches to empathy focusing on such things as mirror neurons, facial recognition, and emotional entrainment capture some of the basic intersubjective processes enabling more complex forms of empathic engagements, but they fail to capture the many ways that the social and interpersonal world trigger, mediate, and modulate this bodily responsiveness. Conversely, the sociological and anthropological methods that capture the way social and interpersonal worlds amplify or suppress empathic processes tell us little, if anything, about the neurobiological processes in which all social knowing and awareness – including empathy – is entangled. But apart from these disciplinary limitations, it is also the case that the overall complexity and dynamism of the real-time body-world interactions involved in empathic processes are challenging to observe and conceptualize even under the best of circumstances, and even with teams of researchers using a variety of methods.

The complexity begins with the fact that empathic processes always implicate and involve the people, animals, or other targets of empathy, even though our observations and conceptualizations of these processes too often focus only on the person or persons attempting to empathize (Hollan 2008). Those with whom we are attempting to understand and empathize may react and respond in a variety of ways to our efforts: they may encourage our understanding of themselves and give us feedback that enhances our understanding of them, they may remain indifferent to our efforts, or they may actively discourage or evade our attempts to gain a first person–like perspective on their experience (Hollan 2008). In the latter two cases, the accuracy of empathic efforts must remain forever in doubt, since we will not be receiving the kind of feedback that would either confirm or disconfirm our empathic inferences. Indeed, this is the point at which many empathic processes break down: the empathizer assuming that she has accurately resonated with another’s experience when the target of empathy knows or experiences otherwise.

Empathic processes are also always in motion as people’s emotional states and perspectives change over time, and even from moment to moment, sometimes as a result of having been empathized with. As a result, there is no end to an empathic process, one never knows once and for all what another person is thinking, feeling, or experiencing (see also Reddy, this volume). This is why Main et al. (2017) consider a sense of curiosity to be such an important attribute for someone who empathizes well, because one must be *curious* about others in order to follow, imagine, and approximate experiential vicissitudes that are ceaseless. Currently, however, ethnographic investigations of empathy are often more successful at capturing how groups of people conceptualize, value, or name empathic processes than tracking the fluctuations of empathic processes as they unfold in the moment or over time.

Another complication in the naturalistic study of empathy is that actual displays of or attempts at empathy are related to a host of variables, including economic standing, gender, cultural norms and expectations, social class, and, not least, to a given person’s overall dispositional (or “trait”) tendency to empathize or not, a tendency that develops over a lifetime, regardless of social or cultural context, and which may be affected by a variety of both conscious and unconscious factors. While these developmental differences among people in the tendency to empathize regardless of the social context may be quite significant, to date, many of those taking an ethnographic approach to the study of empathy have either overlooked or ignored them.

These are just a few of the factors contributing to the complexity and dynamism of empathic processes as they unfold in real time, and which make their ethnographic observation so challenging. Taken together, they suggest that an empathic process that is more accurate than not requires effort, patience, and curiosity on the part of the empathizers and a certain degree of cooperation or openness to interaction and observation on the

part of the targets of empathy, and that none of this is assured in any given empathic engagement. In other words, there is work and effort involved in establishing and maintaining an empathic connection. Very little about the process, apart from the most basic perceptual capacities involved, is automatic or without the possibility of disruption and failure.

While there are many aspects of this dynamic process that need further naturalistic study and exploration, for my purposes here, I will be focusing on the relationship between social context and a person's experientially acquired tendency to empathize as previously mentioned, not only to help fill this gap in the ethnographic study of empathy, but also to underscore that the motivations for and the effects of empathy are likely to be much more variable than usually assumed. Empathic processes may and do frighten people as well as sooth them (Robbins and Rumsey 2008; Hollan and Throop 2008, 2011). They can generate not only compassion and prosocial behaviors, but may also be used to hurt or embarrass people (Bubandt and Willerslev 2015), or to avoid obligations and responsibilities. Intimate knowledge gained through empathic engagements may lead to greater love and concern, but also to dislike and hatred, even in therapeutic contexts, as the psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott (1949) has discussed.

I explore some of these dynamics and the work involved in establishing and maintaining empathic engagements in a psychotherapeutic setting in southern California and among the Toraja of South Sulawesi, Indonesia. In the psychotherapeutic example, I examine some of the life experiential aspects of empathic engagements that can affect their establishment or duration, in particular, how transference – in the psychoanalytic sense – can affect participants' interpretations of an attempt at empathy, and whether those attempts are remembered as being successful or not. In the Toraja example, I consider some of the experiential factors that led one man to over-empathize according to local norms of care and concern and another to under-empathize.

### **Empathy in a psychotherapeutic setting**

Laurence Kirmayer (2008) has noted the special obstacles to empathy that obtain in a psychiatric clinic serving a diverse population in which the opacities of more severe forms of mental and emotional distress, and language and cultural differences, may challenge or impede successful communications between mental health workers and patients. In such circumstances, those attempting to empathize will need to assume a political and ethical stance that will enable them to weather the inevitable misunderstandings that will arise between themselves and patients, and to maintain the conviction that empathy remains possible despite all the difficulties and frustration encountered along the way. Although Kirmayer limits his discussion to a context in which the obstacles to communication between people are obvious if not extreme, his observation that durable, successful empathic

engagements may require a high degree of patience and commitment may be more widely applicable than he himself was claiming, largely because real-time empathic processes anywhere are always highly complex and dynamic, and require more effort to sustain than usually thought.

I want to explore this possibility further by examining some of my own attempts at empathy in the context of my research psychoanalytic practice in southern California. Although many people who come to a psychotherapeutic practice like mine also experience emotional distress of various kinds and degrees, most do not suffer from the kind of psychotic illnesses that Kirmayer discusses. Their communications are generally comprehensible to a therapist, even if that comprehension is always partial and limited. This makes psychotherapeutic settings an interesting place to examine the dynamics of empathic processes because the norms of therapeutic engagement tend to amplify and make visible aspects of the process that are otherwise difficult to observe or evaluate in everyday settings. For example, a psychotherapist is given license to ask a person directly how a gesture or statement meant to empathize was received, something that most empathizers, including most anthropologists, can usually only assume, infer, or wonder about. As a therapist, I have often had the experience of thinking the gestures or statements I have made to someone clearly conveyed my wish to be helpful and empathic, only to be told otherwise in no uncertain terms. The fact that therapy may persist over relatively long periods of time also reveals how a gesture experienced as empathic at one point of time may be remembered as unempathic at another point, and the reverse; how a gesture or statement that was once experienced as unempathic may later be remembered as having been empathic.

The norms and duration of many forms of psychotherapy also allow for the exploration of a person's previous life experiences, which may reveal how such experiences influence a person's tendency to react, often unconsciously, to empathic gestures or statements in the way they do, either positively or negatively, with strong emotion, or with indifference or avoidance. This telescoping and merging of past and present, the way in which past experiences may indirectly influence present and future ones, is what psychoanalysts refer to as "transference." From a psychoanalytic perspective, transferences are ubiquitous, affecting every aspect of human behavior, including attempts at empathy, yet they and the temporal complexities of experienced moments they reflect and index (Stern 2004) are rarely mentioned in the literature on empathy, much less examined very directly or explicitly.

I want to consider some of these transference effects on empathy as they unfolded between myself and a man I will refer to as Frank during the course of our psychotherapy sessions together. Although I focus specifically on Frank and myself in this section, my larger point is that empathic engagements may be challenging to maintain even in the very best of circumstances, such as a psychotherapeutic context in which empathy is explicitly

valued and encouraged. If this is so, as anthropologists, are we generally overestimating the automaticity and ease with which empathic engagements are made and maintained, even within families or small, monocultural and monolingual communities?

Frank and I discussed many things during the course of his psychotherapy, but especially his concerns about if and when he should ever forgive the people who had hurt or injured him in his life. And unfortunately for him, there had been many of these. Frank had been adopted as an infant by a couple who could not have their own biological children. According to Frank, his parents never really got over their disappointment about not having their own children, and never made any real effort to make him feel wanted or loved. His parents could be very critical of him, especially of his appearance and complexion. Frank harbored a great deal of resentment towards the couple who had adopted him, and also toward the people who had given birth to him and who had given him up for adoption without even getting to know him. Unlike many other adopted children during the era when Frank was growing up, he had no interest in finding out who his biological parents were or whether they were still alive or dead. They had shown no interest in him, so why should he show any interest in them? He told me that he often wished his parents by adoption were dead, and sometimes dreamed of them being trapped in dangerous, violent situations with no possibility of rescue.

As early in his young life as he could, Frank tried to get away from his parents. He married one of his first girlfriends and had two children with her in quick succession. But the marriage was an unhappy one, Frank coming to think that his wife was also overly critical and unloving of him, much like his parents, and he eventually divorced. During the time I was seeing Frank, he was deeply involved with another woman whom he thought he loved, but by this time in his life, he had become so wary of being hurt and disappointed by people that he was reluctant to make their relationship more permanent, and was pondering the possibility of leaving her. When later he did leave her and then come to regret it, he was angry and disappointed with me that I had not done more to stop him. Here is an example of a gesture that was once experienced as empathic – my understanding of why he might want to leave his partner – that was later experienced as being unempathic.

Let me bring attention to two things here that help illustrate the challenges of empathizing with another accurately and consistently. The first is how previous life experiences affect our experience and interpretation of later ones. Frank had been hurt by several people in his life, beginning in infancy with the loss of his biological parents. These hurts and resentments tended to blur into one another and become “nested” (Brudholm 2008, pp. 57–58), newer hurts and resentments tending to stir up older ones, and older ones leading Frank to anticipate that he would be hurt again, sometimes to the point of Frank precipitating painful clashes with others rather than passively wait for these others to hurt him first. One of the

consequences of such temporal and phenomenological blurring, as the philosopher Thomas Brudholm notes, is that one can become confused about how justifiable one's hurt and resentment is in any particular instance, and ambivalent about one's engagements with others. In Frank's case, he had become very uncertain about whether he wanted to remain with his current partner or not. On some days, he thought he was being unfair to her, imagining her to be more like his former wife and parents than she really was, and imagining how lost he would be without her. On other days, though, he was certain she was a bad fit for him and that if he stayed with her, he would end up hurt and miserable.

Of course, it is not uncommon for people, anywhere, to be uncertain or ambivalent about aspects of their lives. Indeed, it is around such uncertainty and ambivalence that many people most strongly desire empathy from others. But this brings me to the second point: how difficult it becomes to empathize with someone who is in such a state. This is because people in the midst of uncertainty or ambivalence often shift their stance regarding the uncertainty from day to day and even moment to moment, hoping to settle upon a stance that will eventually resolve the uncertainty or ambivalence (James 1962). The tracking of this stance-shifting on the part of a potential empathizer may be challenging enough, but in addition, the stance-shifter may seek validation and recognition of each of these various stances as she assumes them, and may feel misunderstood by others if these others fail to resonate with such alternating stances quickly enough or appropriately enough. In my case, Frank wanted me to resonate with both his desire to stay with his partner and to leave her, depending on the day and time. If he sensed that I was confused by his ambivalence or that I was trying to maintain my therapeutic neutrality with regard to whether he should stay or leave, he could become upset and disappointed with me. Yet another person who failed to understand him and the dilemmas he faced.

Ironically, Frank's confusion about when or whether to forgive people, including me, was intensified by a widespread trope in middle-class North American culture that one needed to forgive and forget in order to be happy and move on with one's life. Frank found such tropes – which he worried had become a psychotherapeutic piety that I would force him to accept – to be naïve and infuriating. He might have trouble at times knowing how angry and resentful to become and with whom, but that some people deserved his ire and contempt, he had no doubt. To be told through these ubiquitous tropes that he needed to forgive the people who had harmed him, sometimes very consciously and deliberately, was like a slap in the face to him, and actually led Frank to cling to his resentments even more than he might have otherwise. Frank was not about to purchase his happiness at the expense of justice, but he was also aware that none of his protests had actually brought him the apologies or love he was seeking and that they could, at least at certain times, make him emotionally ill and interfere with his judgment about how to get or do the other things he wanted in life, including how to choose



an appropriate partner or therapist for himself, or knowing when to be differential to someone and when to be firm.

I want to emphasize again that I am presenting Frank's case not because I think he is an unusually difficult person to empathize with, but rather to illustrate that his struggles with nested resentments – and the ambivalences and uncertainties they create in his life – are all too common. Although Frank was an unhappily adopted child, many people struggle with the legacies of relationships and experiences that have been problematic for them, leaving a residue of uncertainty about who can and should be trusted in the present and future. People can feel hopeful about their relationships and their prospects one day, and less than hopeful and haunted by past difficulties the next. The norms and values of psychotherapeutic contexts, in which people are explicitly encouraged to be open about what is troubling them, make such everyday uncertainties and ambivalences – and the dynamic flows of emotion, perception, and experience they entail – more visible than they would otherwise be, but such uncertainties are certainly not unique to people in psychotherapy.

Psychotherapeutic situations also expose how difficult it can be for a potential empathizer to track such dynamic flows of emotion and perception, and how often such efforts miss the mark, even when the potential empathizer is professionally trained and motivated. Frank was often telling me that my tracking of his relationship with his partner was either behind or ahead of where he actually felt himself to be, and partly because of that, he was forever concerned that I would somehow try to force him to make peace with her even when she did not deserve it.

My argument here is that the challenges I had tracking Frank's emotional flows were not peculiar to me or to Frank or to the psychotherapeutic setting, but rather are characteristic of empathic engagements more generally. Some of this is due to the dynamic nature of these engagements, as people's emotions and experiences fluctuate from moment to moment, and some of it is due to the transference factors I have highlighted here: the fact that a person's past experiences may influence their future engagements, but often in ways that most potential empathizers can have no way of anticipating – unless, of course, they are familiar with that person's past. If this so, then any empathic engagement anywhere that is meant to go beyond a static moment in time will require the kind of ethical and political work that Kirmayer discusses, whether occurring in a psychiatric clinic or not. Only such a stance will enable empathizers to remain curious about and engaged with another person, no matter how variable and flowing their emotional states and perspectives may become.

### **Empathy in Toraja, South Sulawesi, Indonesia**

At the time I came to know Nene'na Tandi and Nene'an Limbong (Hollan and Wellenkamp 1994, 1996), they were both wet-rice farmers living in

a rural, mountaintop village in Toraja, South Sulawesi, Indonesia. As an anthropologist living in their village, I was able to observe their engagements with people on a day-to-day basis for over a year, but I was also got to know them through the person-centered interviews (Levy and Hollan 2015; Hollan 2005) I conducted with each of them. During the course of those extended, open-ended interviews, both men discussed many aspects of their life experiences with me – culturally salient ones, as well as more idiosyncratic ones that obviously lingered in their memories and emotional lives. My role as an anthropologist was not to further unpack those memories and emotional experiences or to encourage Nene’na Tandi and Nene’na Limbong to reflect on them more self-consciously, as I might as a research psychoanalyst. However, I was able to develop a sense of what kinds of experiences had been highly salient for each man and how those experiences were playing into their everyday behavior, including their tendency to empathize with others or not.

Life in this remote village was challenging, most people living just above a subsistence level, and so mutual aid and assistance was considered a prime social virtue. Without the least bit of embarrassment or shame, villagers often relied upon an idiom and discourse of appeal to openly solicit – with humility and deference – the help and concern of others, especially those who were even marginally wealthier and of higher social rank. While it was often said and expected that such appeals could not be resisted, so effective were they at evoking the caring responses of others, it was clear that people did in fact respond in variable ways. For example, although Nene’na Tandi was not a wealthy or high-status person, he was an unusually kind and generous man, by Toraja standards, one who often used what the Toraja referred to as “sweet” words to sooth and comfort people. He himself attributed his empathic-like tendencies to the hardships he had experienced as a young man. He had been a wild and rambunctious child – so wild and difficult that his family eventually sent him to live with people in a distant corner of Tana Toraja, an act of desperation on the part of his family that was highly unusual among the Toraja, given their love for and appreciation of children. He remained defiant, however, and when he was old enough, he fled to New Guinea to try his luck as a trader, an occupation at which he failed miserably. He spent several months in New Guinea in abject poverty, nearly starving, he claimed, and was only able to return to Toraja thanks to the compassion of a ship’s captain who, upon hearing his story, gave him passage home.

It was during this period of great suffering and uncertainty in his life that he began to think, along very traditional lines, that he was being punished by God and the ancestors for his self-centered behavior. Contritely, he attempted to build a more conventional life for himself: he moved back to his home village, married a woman his parents approved of, and started working the family’s rice fields. Eventually, he became the respected farmer, Christian, and orator I knew during my fieldwork – but even so, he and his wife were never

able to have their own children. This was a great misfortune for him, given that children were considered to be the most important emotional, social, and economic resource a person could have. To the end of his life, Nene'na Tandi never stopped worrying that his childlessness had been sent to him as a punishment for his bad behavior as a youth, especially in light of the many offerings and prayers he had made over the years asking for forgiveness.

Such hardships can certainly make a person bitter and unsympathetic to the plights of others, but not Nene'na Tandi. He knew what it was like to suffer, to be abandoned, and to feel small and forgotten – and as a result, he tended to be generous and empathic even with people who were not, from a Toraja perspective, deserving of such help. Part of the advice he often gave people was to listen to those who were wiser and more knowledgeable than themselves, so that they might avoid making the kind of mistakes he had made, and for which he had suffered greatly.

In contrast, Nene'na Limbong grew up with many of the things Nene'na Tandi did not: more rice fields, higher status, stable caretaking, two marriages that produced thirteen children and numerous grandchildren, and positions of village leadership from his youth onwards. He was considered one of “biggest” men in the village and wielded considerable political and economic influence – yet, he was known for his relative “hardness” and unresponsiveness toward others. Some of this was due to the fact that he *was* relatively prosperous, a man to whom many people turned in time of need. He had learned from playing the patron role over many years that his fellow villagers did occasionally lie about or misrepresent their circumstances in order to receive help or resources, and that he needed to protect himself and his family from the community's nearly constant demands upon him. He was one of the Toraja I knew who had dreamed of himself as a sacrificial animal being killed, butchered, and distributed to the village in just the way that pigs and buffaloes are killed at community feasts. At some level then, despite his high status and relative prosperity, Nene'na Limbong experienced himself as someone whose obligations to his fellow villagers were literally killing him.

But this wariness and suspiciousness of others went beyond the immediate demands of his social and economic role. Dating back to his childhood, he had been troubled by a series of dreams in which he had been attacked or harmed by others, including his own father (Hollan 2003, 2014b). He was certain that several of these dreams had suggested that certain people did in fact want to harm him, an outcome that he claimed he had escaped only by taking evasive or reparative action of various kinds. The demands of his role as a patron certainly resonated with and likely reinforced these more long-standing uncertainties about the intentions of others, but this life-long wariness, in turn, also led Nene'na Limbong to be more contentious and less diplomatic in his patron role than he needed to be, compared to other patrons, and certainly less “empathic” than many others in the community, such as Nene'na Tandi.

Nene'na Tandi and Nene'na Limbong grew up speaking the same language in the same generation in the same small community, yet their differing social and family backgrounds led to very different life experiences – experiences which left them more or less likely to enact widespread Toraja values regarding empathy toward those in need. Interestingly, one could well imagine that their tendencies to empathize would be the reverse of what they were: Nene'na Limbong's social and economic security allowing him to be unusually generous and compassionate with people, while Nene'na Tandi's hardships and disappointments leading him to be indifferent to the plight of others. But such was not the case. One of the most notable things about the emotional residues of past experiences is that they often can be triggered and then play forward in unexpected, surprising ways. This is why empathic processes do not always flow unimpeded along the channels set out for them by prevailing cultural values and attitudes. Transference reactions by either the potential empathizer or by the target of empathy may make empathic engagements either more or less likely, regardless of whether such displays are culturally and socially encouraged or discouraged.

### **Concluding thoughts**

Much of the ethnographic work on empathy to date has examined how a variety of social, cultural, political-economic, and moral processes amplify or suppress the tendency to empathize and influence whether empathy is used to help or to harm. Such contextual factors indicate that “complex” empathy – empathy that allows one to approximate *why* other people might be experiencing what they are – rarely, if ever, unfolds as quickly and automatically as some simulation theorists of empathy would suggest (Kogler and Stueber 2000; Stueber 2006), yet much of this work remains at the level of social or cultural expectation *about* empathy and its appropriateness to given situations, not on how these expectations actually feed into and influence – or not – empathic processes as they unfold in ongoing naturally occurring behavior. Relatedly, much of this work is also limited by its failure to consider how people's experientially acquired tendency to empathize or not affects the unfolding of empathic processes, whether culturally or morally encouraged or not.

I have attempted to address some of these shortcomings in the existing ethnographic literature by examining how actual empathic engagements unfolded over time in two quite distinct cultural settings, a psychotherapeutic consulting room in southern California and a remote mountaintop village in Toraja, South Sulawesi, Indonesia. In both cases, I have suggested that experiential factors may affect empathic engagements in ways that do not coincide with cultural expectations. I began with the clinical example because a psychotherapeutic setting makes visible the moment-to-moment intersubjective tracking processes involved in any empathic engagement as it unfolds in real time, but which is otherwise very difficult to observe. It does

this by allowing the therapist to inquire directly and repeatedly about how a client experiences an empathic gesture and by enabling the observation of how past emotional experiences tend to influence – or not – future engagements. I used my own difficulties tracking Frank's fluctuating emotions and perspectives, even within a context in which empathy is explicitly valued and encouraged and in which Frank and I shared a similar language and social, cultural, and racial background, to illustrate not only how past emotional experiences may erupt into present ones in unexpected ways, but also to suggest that such dynamic flows and the challenges they pose to accurate and sustained empathy are likely characteristic of all empathic engagements anywhere. This challenges the notion that complex empathy is relatively automatic or rote. Rather, empathy anywhere that is more accurate than not, and that endures for more than a fleeting moment, will likely require the commitment to patience with and curiosity about others that Kirmayer (2008) recommends, regardless of whether such commitment is culturally or situationally encouraged or not.

In the Toraja example, I focused on the differences in the way two men typically engaged with others, and empathized or not, to underscore the fact that while one can identify contexts and situations in Toraja in which empathic-like displays are more likely to occur than in others, actual displays – for either help or harm – are affected by the histories and tendencies of the people involved. Those who have become wary of others, such as Nene'na Limbong, have a more difficult time imagining and responding to the needs of others, even when those needs are considered socially and culturally legitimate. Conversely, people like Nene'na Tandi may go out of their way to engage with others and commiserate with them, even when that imaginative perspective-taking is not culturally expected or rewarded, and may even be frowned upon or prohibited. Such proclivities or dispositions may affect a person's likelihood of using empathy in harmful ways, as well.

Of course, there may be patterns to such intracultural variations in the display of empathy. For example, it may be that certain kinds of psychological wounds or nurturing experiences are likely to eventuate in prosocial empathic responsiveness, while other kinds of psychological wounds or nurturing experiences are likely to eventuate in bitterness, defensiveness, and either lack of empathic perspective-taking or perspective-taking used to harm or frustrate another. The point is that people enact culturally constituted values and moral orientations in different ways, depending on how those values and orientations are learned and either reinforced or undermined throughout life, and that this process is highly dynamic and contingent with many unintended and sometimes idiosyncratic outcomes (Hollan 2012). If so, then transference – in the psychoanalytic sense – will be as central to empathic awareness and responsiveness as it is to many other aspects of human interaction and behavior. It is not that particular situational factors such as economic standing, social role, race, class, and gender do not impinge upon and influence empathic processes in significant ways, but that



we cannot assume that they impinge upon or influence people in uniform ways, regardless of personal history and experience.

Although I have focused here on the relation between life experiential factors that may affect a person's empathic reactivity and some of the situational factors that either encourage or discourage actual displays of empathy, the overall dynamics of empathic display are even more complex and contingent. Nezlek et al. (2007) report that among the sample of middle-class Americans they studied, day-to-day displays of empathy varied independently of their measure of a person's overall tendency to empathize and depended on such things as a person's mood, the number of people with whom they were interacting, momentary levels of self-esteem, and the kinds of activity in which they were engaged, whether "social" or achievement-related. They suggest that "the capacity to experience empathy in the right contexts can be viewed as a skill or ability rather than as an automatic, dispositionally driven process" and that future research needs to be more "context-specific" so that it might help us "understand the costs and benefits of dispositional empathy, and how the flexible activation and deactivation of state empathy contributes to social interaction and resilience" (Nezlek et al. 2007, pp. 197–198).

All of these variables – tendency to empathize, momentary mood and levels of self-esteem, number of people with whom one is interacting and in what way – play into the dynamics of empathic processes as they unfold in real time. And all of these variables are interconnected to one another, but in nonlinear, looping, associational, non-uniform ways that may telescope or condense aspects of time, experience, and imagination. The phenomenon of transference is a good example of this. One who is experientially inclined to have empathy for others can be in a situation in which empathy for another person is culturally or morally encouraged, but because this other person's color of hair or tone of voice or embodied gestures reminds one, consciously or unconsciously, of a harsh and critical former teacher, perhaps from many years previously, he cannot find the patience or curiosity to extend himself in an empathic way. Conversely, one who is experientially inclined not to empathize with others, perhaps because she feels no one has ever properly empathized with her own many hardships, can find herself in a situation in which a person's plight seems so uncannily familiar to her in some way that she finds herself uncharacteristically curious about and resonating with this other person's perspective on something, even when such empathy may go against the cultural, moral, or experiential grain. And in either case, the associational loops are contingent and may fluctuate rapidly and continuously – or not.

All of this suggests that we should be conceptualizing empathic processes as a part of larger social, behavioral, and moral *ecologies*, empathic processes being affected by and implicated in these larger dynamically related ecologies, but also affecting and shaping them in turn. Race, class, gender, and political economy structure and constrain the way people experientially



learn and internalize – or not – certain moral or cultural attitudes about who is entitled to empathy and when, yet actual empathic engagements may also feed back into those prevailing moral and cultural attitudes, either reinforcing or undermining them. People can come to experience empathy for those with whom they were once unaware or unconcerned, and conversely, they can lose concern for or curiosity about those with whom they once had empathic engagements. There are many moving parts here, all in dynamic relation to one another, and all subject to relatively sudden and unanticipated change. The same empathy that can be used to help someone can rather quickly be turned around to hurt them, which is no doubt why so many people around the world are protective of their first-person perspective and so wary of the fallibilities of empathic-like knowledge (Hollan and Throop 2008, 2011).

I have been emphasizing the dynamics, vicissitudes, and fragility of empathic engagements – how contingent they are; how dependent they are on their interconnections with larger social, moral, and political-economic ecologies; and how difficult they are to study as a part of ongoing naturalistic behavior – but I want to be clear that I think empathic engagements are an essential aspect of social life and awareness that require much more and better research, not less. While it is clear that our empathic engagements – and all of the social, moral, and political benefits that are usually entailed by them – are too often biased towards those who are close or familiar to us (de Waal 2009), it is no less clear that empathy can be used to stretch our moral imaginations in the direction of greater social inclusion and equity, and is experienced by most people most of the time, even if only fleetingly, as an essential aspect of personal well-being and resilience. To underscore the fragility and contingency of empathy, then, is not to minimize its importance or value in human life, but rather an effort to bring to empathic processes the careful attention and analysis they deserve.

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## 6 Should we be against empathy?

### Engagement with antiheroes in fiction and the theoretical implications for empathy's role in morality

*Margrethe Bruun Vaage*

Empathy is often seen as a virtue: being empathic is equated with being a morally good person, and empathy is seen as a route to morally praiseworthy insights and actions. Recently, this view has come under attack from Jesse Prinz and Paul Bloom, among others, and it is argued that empathy is biased – and as such is not a trustworthy route to morality. In this chapter, I concur with critics that empathy is not reliable morally. I argue that the ease with which the spectator is made to empathize with morally bad antiheroes in television series demonstrates that empathy is amoral – neither morally good nor morally bad. Low-level empathic experiences, or what I discuss as embodied empathy, can easily lead us astray, and antihero series manipulate feelings of embodied empathy in order to make the spectator root for antiheroes, although these characters commit crimes that the very same spectator would normally condemn. Nevertheless, I do not agree with critics that we should therefore discard empathy – even if we could. In spite of the biases of embodied empathy, we can make use of a more cognitively demanding, higher-order form of empathy that I label ‘imaginative empathy’ in order to counteract our own biases and reach a more considered, principally informed view on the antihero and other characters. Fiction can also make deliberate use of the biased nature of empathy, such as the so-called proximity effect, to foster understanding for those in out-groups.

#### **Empathy with the antihero and moral evaluation**

In cognitive film theory, a moral evaluation of the characters is typically seen as foundational to the spectator's engagement in fiction film: a positive moral evaluation of a character leads to a sympathetic allegiance, and the opposite is the antipathy felt towards villains (Smith 1995; Carroll 2008). Empathizing with characters is not seen as central to engagement in film (e.g. Carroll 2001, p. 310ff, 2008, p. 161ff), or it is seen as subordinate to other forms of engagement, guided by the spectator's moral evaluation of

the characters (e.g., Smith 1995, p. 103). However, this view is now contested. Carl Plantinga, for example, points out that the spectator's evaluation of the characters is influenced by many non-moral factors, although she might interpret her evaluation as "having legitimate moral force" (Plantinga 2010, p. 48).

This critique is in part fuelled by insights from moral psychology on moral intuitions and emotions. According to moral psychologists, a moral judgment can rely on two different kinds of cognition: one pre-reflective through low-level intuitions and emotions, and the other reflective, deliberate, higher-order conscious reasoning. This is a dual-process model of morality. Proponents of this model would typically emphasize how we rely heavily on the low-level, intuitive route, and that moral intuitions and emotions have evolved in order to secure cooperation. They make us cooperate peacefully within our own group. Thus, Joshua Greene, for example, sees moral intuitions and emotions as deeply tribal (Greene 2013).

An important predecessor to this model is the heuristics and biases approach developed by Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky.<sup>1</sup> They demonstrate that our fast thinking is prone to errors and mistakes, and is characterized by a number of biases and heuristics (rules of thumb) that we apply without much awareness. These biases and heuristics are functional for us in that they alleviate us of the taxing burden of having to evaluate everything, always, reflectively – which would be next to impossible for any human being. We need to delegate large parts of on-going processing to lower cognitive processes. This is what our intuitions do for us: they are pre-reflective, automated, low-level thinking. However, as Kahneman and Tversky point out, there are many situations where we should be sceptical of intuitive judgments, and turn to slow thinking.

The dual-process model of human cognition, including morality, necessitates a re-examination of the nature of character engagement in fiction. Although some fiction films, such as puzzle films and modernist films, clearly encourage thinking of the deliberate, slow kind, I argue that when we engage with fiction, we allow ourselves to rely heavily on the intuitive route to morality (Vaage 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2019). When we engage with fiction, we typically bracket many moral principles that we would otherwise support, and we navigate the storyworld by use of moral intuitions and emotions. Think of *Dirty Harry* for example: few of us would support policemen acting as vigilante punishers, but watching Inspector Callahan mete out the just desert those punks deserve can be strangely appealing. Intuitively, harsh punishment can be gratifying to watch, even when it runs counter to one's moral principles. It is, after all, only fiction, and intuitively, the desire to see a wrongdoer punished is strong. Differentiating between moral intuitions and emotions on the one hand, and rational moral evaluation on the other, can explain several seemingly puzzling features of our engagement with fiction, such as our propensity to enjoy much harsher punishment in fiction than in real life, and our tendency to engage with immoral

antiheroes, as will be my case study in this chapter. My aim here is to tease out the role played by empathy in our engagement with antiheroes, and reflect on the implications of this for empathy's role in morality.

The antihero is a radical other in some ways: in the trend of morally bad protagonists in American television series, he is very often a criminal – indeed, a murderer. Yet there was a tendency for the spectator to like him, and this gave rise to scrutiny of these series, and our engagement with them, both in critical reception and in the academic literature. The fictional context is an important factor when understanding the positive appraisal of the antihero. I discuss some differences between empathy with characters in fiction, and people in real life elsewhere (Vaage 2009, p. 172ff), basically pointing out that it may be easier – and less risky – to engage with characters in fiction because it is a limited experience which will not have the same implications as empathizing with someone in real life, in terms of obligations for example. Furthermore, when I empathize with a fictional character, I am free to focus on the character's experience without being too concerned about my own role as empathizer.<sup>2</sup> In other words, there are some important differences between empathy with real people and empathy with characters in fiction. Fiction might facilitate empathy because of the lack of practical obligations and implications for the spectator.

In addition to this, fiction can bring us very close to a fictional character, giving us access to their thoughts and feelings in a way few people in the storyworld would have, and in ways which would be practically impossible in real life – we can witness them when they are alone, when they have confidential conversations with their therapists, when they are in various situations with a range of other people that no one person would actually have access to, etc. Their emotions might be interpreted for us, with stylistic effects such as non-diegetic music highlighting their affective state, and close-up shots alerting us to an important change in their experience – a mere micro-expression perhaps that we would hardly notice in real life, lingering in a close-up on the screen for longer than we might practically speaking be able to stare uninterruptedly at others in dramatic situations. And without having to interact – and thus to have to consider on one's own role in the situation in real life – when engaging in fiction, one is left to concentrate fully on the character's experience on-screen. These are some of the reasons why empathy with fictional characters is bound to be different from empathy with people in real life. Nevertheless, in both cases, we probably rely on the very same empathic abilities – and as such, we do not need a model for empathy that is specific only to fiction, although we should be aware of the differences in how this is activated.

Indeed, the best approach to empathy too is a dual-process model (Vaage 2010). There are two forms of empathy: one is low-level and automatic, and I will discuss this as embodied empathy, and another type of empathy is more cognitively demanding, including efforts to put oneself in the other's shoes and imagine what it is like to be her (see also Throop, this volume).



I label this imaginative empathy (see also Hollan, this volume). A dual-process model of empathy enables us to postulate a more complex theory about empathy and morality. In relation to fiction, rather than assuming an always fully rational spectator who actively deliberates and evaluates and comes to the conclusion that a character is morally good, and only then might she possibly empathize with the character, it is arguably often the other way around: a story can activate low-level forms of empathy that influence the spectator's moral evaluation of the characters to a great extent. For example, in antihero series such as *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad*, the spectator comes to like, root for and sympathize with the antihero partly because she is made to empathize with him first. Our moral evaluation is relatively easy to manipulate, and one reason is that intuitive, low-level empathy may be easily conflated with low-level morality: I feel with this character, and loathe this other character; hence, the former must be morally preferable to the latter – or so we seem to think.

Allow me to revisit two examples from my research on the antihero, which I discuss at length elsewhere. I will expand on my analysis of these two examples here by focusing on the relationship between empathy and morality specifically. The first example is taken from the episode “Second Opinion” in *The Sopranos* (season 3, episode 7). Tony Soprano is the boss of the New Jersey mafia and his uncle Junior has cancer. Junior is worried about the treatment he has been given, but his oncologist, Dr Kennedy, does not return his calls. This infuriates Tony. He approaches Dr Kennedy on the golf course and scares him into taking better care of his patient. Murray Smith writes of this scene: “If we isolate the miniature drama that unfolds between Soprano and Kennedy during ‘Second Opinion’, there’s no doubt that Soprano comes across as the more sympathetic character, largely on moral grounds” (Smith 2011a, p. 78). I agree that most spectators probably would perceive Tony as being morally right in this sequence (Vaage 2014, 2016, p. 45ff). A typical reaction might be to enjoy the humiliation of Dr Kennedy, and cheer for Tony. But is this evaluation of the two characters really made on moral grounds? Rationally speaking, the doctor may be arrogant, but as long as Junior is given the proper treatment, this is no crime; however, intimidating people with threats of violence is. Alignment with and access to Tony have had profound effects on the spectator's evaluation of him. The spectator has followed Tony through his anxiety attacks, learned about his psychopathic mother, his troubled conscience and about how much he cares for a little family of ducks that has lived in his pool over the summer. The spectator does not learn much about Dr Kennedy. Alignment systematically influences moral evaluation, as does familiarity with people in real life: intuitive morality “binds and blinds”, in the words of Jonathan Haidt (2012, p. 191). We are blinded by familiarity when we see Tony as morally right.

Another way to put this is that we have been given so many opportunities to empathize with Tony over time, and next to no opportunities to

empathize with Dr Kennedy – and when it comes to a conflict between the two, our intuitive low-level response will tend to favour the familiar character. We see Tony as morally right because we feel with him. Our moral evaluation of the sequence is skewed partly because of our empathic engagement. This is in line with current research on empathy: as Heidi L. Maibom points out, empathy is parochial, “we feel more empathy for those close to us spatially, temporally, and affectionately” (Maibom 2014b, p. 28). We would thus be more prone to empathize with someone close to us, whom we see face to face and who is similar to us, such as the neighbour’s child who is nervous about starting school, and it would take more of an effort to empathize with those we cannot see, say war-struck orphans in Afghanistan. There is enormous potential to manipulate our empathic engagement with characters in fiction because of this, through carefully giving us close access to some characters but not others, or framing some characters as more similar to us and others as more alien. As Murray Smith has argued, engagement with an antihero such as Tony Soprano can be encouraged by emphasizing how he is similar to us, and thus familiar, such as highlighting how he is a family man, facing the sort of challenges with his teenage children that are recognizable to most parents, and suffering from anxiety and depression, as is also familiar to many (Smith 2011a). He is thus presented to us partly as deeply human and recognizable. Although Smith does not discuss this explicitly in terms of empathy, his point makes good sense in relation to the research on empathy that Maibom is pointing to. As we will see shortly, scholars who are against empathy emphasize that we cannot trust empathy to be a route to morality exactly because we favour those we know best when we rely on empathy. These scholars are perfectly right to point to this weakness, and my study of the antihero supplies additional examples of this effect at work.

Let us include one more antihero example. Empathizing with a character in suspenseful sequences can make the spectator feel suspense even for immoral characters (Vaage 2016, p. 64ff). Traditionally, feelings of suspense too are assumed to rely on a moral evaluation (e.g., Carroll 1996, p. 100ff). However, suspense sequences are used throughout *Breaking Bad* to make the spectator engage in Walter’s perspective: the spectator is made to engage empathically in situations in which Walter (or Jesse) is desperately trying to perform an action, and her empathic engagement arguably undermines a fully rational evaluation of the sequence. One example is found in the episode “Mandala” (season 2, episode 11), in which Walter is frantically searching through his partner-in-crime Jesse’s kitchen in order to find some drugs he needs to hand over to the drug kingpin Gus before an imminent deadline. In the middle of this sequence, Walter’s pregnant wife Skyler texts him saying that the baby is coming. However, in my experience of the sequence, I wanted Walter to make it to Gus’s deadline rather than joining her at the hospital. I suggest that it is low-level empathic engagement in his actions that thwarts my moral evaluation of this sequence. Part of the

explanation here is also that these suspense sequences are far more enjoyable than the family sequences in this series. With clenched teeth, I urge Walter on-screen to ignore his wife, partly because of a narrative desire to maximize suspense: watching Walter make Gus's deadline will be more fun. Empathic engagement with Walter is more fun when he is bad, and less fun when he is his bland, ordinary self at home with his wife. This basically made many spectators resent Skyler, and even argue that she is in fact morally worse than him. However, when coming to see Walter as morally preferable to Skyler, or even urging him to ignore her and get on with his drug dealing business locally in the narrative, the spectator's engagement is not determined by a rational moral evaluation of the two characters: the morally right thing to do for a husband is clearly to join his wife when she is giving birth rather than to sell drugs. The effect can be explained as an intuitive positive evaluation of Walter's drug-selling actions due to intuitive empathic engagement with him: low-level empathy, through which the spectator is made to enjoy Walter's criminal behaviour, systematically influences low-level, intuitive morality – she roots for Walter making Gus's deadline. The root cause is that low-level empathy is not determined by a fully fledged rational moral evaluation: empathy can even make us sympathize with bad characters. In the preceding example from *The Sopranos*, the tendency for empathy to be biased by familiarity was arguably at work when the spectator roots for Tony and not the doctor, and this example from *Breaking Bad* points to another weakness inherent in empathy: empathy is easy to manipulate – and in this case, empathic experiences are manipulated by stylistic effects and suspense structures. When re-exploring our engagement with antiheroes in terms of empathy's role, these are two central ways our moral evaluation of characters and events is thwarted by empathy.

### **Against empathy**

Should we then be sceptical of empathy? Yes, we should, argue some philosophers and psychologists. I will look at two such accounts in order to explore the moral problems with empathy further.

Jesse Prinz argues that empathy is not necessary for morality at a descriptive level, and that even at a normative level we better avoid empathy (Prinz 2011a, 2011b). He argues that empathy is not necessary for making moral judgments, nor for moral development, and finally neither as motivation for moral behaviour. His arguments for the first claim – that empathy is not necessary for making moral judgments – is to point to examples where we evaluate something morally without the need to empathize, such as victimless crimes or crimes in which there are no salient victims (e.g., tax evasion, necrophilia, consensual sibling incest). He argues that emotions do underpin morality, but empathy does not. One could argue that although he demonstrates that empathy is not necessary for moral judgment, as we sometimes pass judgment in cases where it is difficult to identify a victim, empathy

could perfectly well *typically* play such a role in cases with victims. As Maibom argues, “empathy is most charitably viewed as relating to victims, not to victimless crimes” (Maibom 2014b, p. 39). Many moral evaluations do involve victims, and empathy can still play a role in such cases.

Prinz goes on to argue that empathy is not necessary for moral development by turning to pathologies such as in the psychopath, who is sometimes used to illustrate how immoral people would be if they lack empathy. However, Prinz points out that first and foremost psychopaths are characterized by ‘callous affect’, or shallow feelings, and in particular they experience fear and sadness only as relatively mild affects, fundamentally different from the way these emotions are experienced by others. Prinz therefore argues that what makes the psychopath prone to immoral behaviour is not empathic but emotional impairment. Against this one could argue that in a simulationist account of empathy, emotional impairment would lead to empathic impairment in just the systematic manner that one finds in psychopaths. Psychopaths do not experience fear in a normal manner, and they find it difficult to recognize and understand fear in others, so this does not rule out empathic impairment as an explanation for the psychopath’s overrepresentation in immoral behaviour.

Finally, Prinz argues that emotions such as guilt work better to motivate people to act morally than empathy does. One can question, though, to what extent people would feel guilty if they did not at any level empathize with the potential victim. It is not clear that the emotion of guilt can fully replace empathy in an explanation of the emotional underpinnings of morality.

Either way, Prinz’s arguments against empathy’s role in morality descriptively might not be his strongest card. He also argues against empathy normatively. So does a developmental psychologist who is against empathy, Paul Bloom. They call attention to the many pitfalls to empathy in relation to morality (see also Ferguson and Wimmer, this volume, and Milton et al., this volume). Empirical studies reveal that empathy gives rise to preferential treatment and in-group bias. We experience more empathy with kin and friends, and with people in our own ethnic group, and of the same gender and sexual orientation (Prinz 2011a, p. 226). Empathy also suffers from proximity and saliency effects. Martin Hoffman, who does give empathy a fundamental role in moral development, points to the very same problems and discusses these as empathy’s “here and now” bias (Hoffman 2014, p. 94). Bloom calls this empathy’s spotlight effect: when empathizing, we focus on short-term effects and ignore long-term consequences, and we also focus on those we can see and ignore those we cannot see (Bloom 2016, p. 9). Prinz adds to this list by pointing out that empathy suffers from cuteness biases as well (e.g., we feel with good-looking people or cute animals more than those who appear less attractive to us). Empathy can also easily be manipulated and is highly selective. One final problem is that empathy is innumerate (Bloom 2016, pp. 9, 31, 34, 36, 89). When empathizing, we tend to want to help the one victim we can see rather than supporting

actions that might help hundreds or thousands of perhaps even more needing victims. Empathy remains unaffected by numbers.

The conclusion both Prinz and Bloom draw is that we are better off avoiding empathy altogether.<sup>3</sup> Bloom sees impartiality as a more reliable route to morality than the partiality inherent in empathy. Although Bloom allows cognitive empathy a role (used to simply understand others), he sees emotional empathy as corrosive, and argues that we “are better off without it” (Bloom 2016, p. 39). Prinz argues against empathy by pointing to the problems it causes, for example when he discusses empathy’s dark side. He argues that collectivist cultures emphasize empathy more but have a dark side because they promote group-thinking and intolerance (Prinz 2011a, p. 224). However, it does seem unfair to imply, as he does, that empathy gave rise to the genocide in Cambodia. Bloom also links empathy to war and atrocities, and even sees it as more harmful than the violent urge in human nature. Indeed, he argues that whereas violence can do good in addition to bad as it “evolved for punishment, defence, and predation” and is “needed to rein in our worst instincts” (Bloom 2016, p. 179), he holds that “empathy can be what motivates conflict in the first place. When some people think about empathy, they think about kindness. I think about war”, he writes (Bloom 2016, p. 188). What Prinz and Bloom argue against here is the group-thinking and parochial nature of humans. Can it be avoided by merely avoiding empathy? If we could magically turn off our empathic abilities, would human beings automatically be less parochial? Would a world populated by humans without empathy be less prone to war and aggression?

Bloom points to the problematic side of violence but argues that in spite of problems, it is needed and is an essential part of human nature. But why then not keep empathy on the very same grounds? Indeed, this is what I am going to argue. The pitfalls that Prinz and Bloom point to are real, and we have seen some of these effects at work in the antihero series as well: fiction can easily manipulate proximity and saliency effects by ensuring that we get more access to the antihero than to his opponents. The engagement with the antihero as other might thus serve to illustrate some of the moral shortcomings of empathy. Nonetheless, we need not for this reason be against empathy.

### **Against against empathy**

Let’s stick with the idea that empathy is an essential part of human nature, like violence, something we share with other animals. One problem for philosophical discussions of empathy and morality is that our working definition or understanding of morality is narrow, influenced by normative philosophies on what morality ought to be. These normative theories might or might not be right prescriptively, but they are still removed from the way morality has worked as human beings evolved. It might be helpful to take a step back and consider the role played by empathy in animal morality.



Kristin Andrews and Lori Gruen (2014) argue that one problem in research on nonhuman ape moralities is that researchers have tended to ignore the apes' social relations, expecting to find a detached and impartial stance as the only manifestation of truly moral behaviour (see also Webb et al. in this volume). This is in line with the standard view in Western moral philosophies, in which the ethical point of view is seen as impartial: one must overcome partiality. Andrews and Gruen argue that if we

step back from our engaged interaction with others as whole persons with relationships, past histories, personalities, social roles, emotions, . . . we are adopting the sort of impartiality and intersubstitutability championed by the standard view.

(p. 207)

Furthermore, they point out that

By assuming this sort of detachment, there is also a danger of unwitting anthropomorphism in that the ethical norms that are being tested are thought to be the same across species and cultures.

(p. 208)

They thus argue that expecting chimpanzees to demonstrate impartiality in order to be truly moral is to hold them to an unreasonably high standard. If you test a chimpanzee's reactions and responses to a co-specific in the lab, the two chimpanzees' actual relation is going to matter greatly, and focusing on responses to strangers will not reveal the intuitive nuts and bolts that enable chimpanzees to cooperate within their group. Franz de Waal states in his study of protomorality and empathy in animals that "empathy builds on proximity, similarity, and familiarity, which is entirely logical given that it evolved to promote in-group cooperation" (de Waal 2009, p. 221).

One could perhaps say the very same thing about humans. Joseph Henrich and colleagues argue that much of what is written about psychology is based on very narrow samples of study from Western, educated, industrialized, rich and democratic (WEIRD) societies (Henrich et al. 2010). These societies are in fact outliers, i.e., unusual compared with human societies globally and historically. Greene and Haidt argue that in Western societies, we have narrowed down what counts as moral questions, and also postulated that impartiality is necessary for proper moral thinking (Greene 2013, p. 338ff; Haidt 2012, p. 111ff; Haidt and Kesebir 2010). However, by doing so, we exclude moralities in other cultures – indeed, as argued by Henrich and colleagues, exclude the morality of most human societies today and throughout history. For example, as demonstrated by Haidt and colleagues, we in Western societies tend to limit morality to principles of justice and harm/care, whereas non-Western cultures rely on a wider range of moral principles, such as moral principles given by the community (interpersonal



obligations given by one's role in the social order) (Haidt and Graham 2007, 2009; Haidt et al. 1993; Haidt 2012). One can expect the partiality of empathy to play a much more important role in an ethics of community, in which the social order and one's place in it are central to morality rather than obstacles to proper moral thinking.

A challenge to the normative view is thus that it asks us to bracket or ignore social relations, whereas in everyday life most moral decisions are made in a social sphere of people we know. Maibom argues that what she labels private morality has largely been ignored in the ethical tradition, and that the focus on how one would act towards strangers fails to capture how most moral decisions we make take place within a network of close social relations, and it is "here that empathy-related emotions may have their greatest importance" (Maibom 2014b, p. 39). This is emphasized in the Ethics of Care tradition (e.g., Gilligan 1982; Slote 2007), and it seems less controversial to say that empathy is important for morality in our private spheres. In Derek Matravers's discussion of empathy and morality, he too ends up raising the question as to "the extent to which morality should or should not be impartial" (Matravers 2017, p. 123). Settling the question of whether or not empathy should play a role in morality hinges on this highly contentious topic. One can argue (Matravers cites Bernard Williams) that a moral theory is not plausible if too far removed from practice – it will only serve to alienate ourselves from our own convictions.

Be that as it may, perhaps this is only a problem descriptively. Prinz and Bloom might still be right normatively. Perhaps WEIRD, impartial morality is morally better. In the globalized, multicultural world we live in now, far removed from small-scale societies in which the partiality of empathy might have worked to some degree, impartial morality is needed to solve the problems we now face. We need to break down the division between us and them, as argued by Greene (2013), and empathy is perhaps part of the problem and not the solution. However, one challenge to this normative view is the role empathy can be said to play in moral change.

In his discussion of empathy and moral development, Hoffman argues that as our empathic abilities evolve, they can extend to new groups and categories of people. This runs counter to what Prinz and Bloom argue. Hoffman agrees that "it may be difficult to empathize directly with an abstract mass without first empathizing with an individual victim and then generalizing to the group", and argues that the latter is exactly what we start doing when we form social concepts and classify people (Hoffman 2014, p. 81). He argues that this effect can often be enhanced by media, and gives such media-enhanced empathy an important role in social change. Among the examples he points to is *Uncle Tom's Cabin* inducing empathy for slaves and thus making people more opposed to slavery. Elaine Scarry makes the same point: it is difficult to imagine others, she argues, but a good author may be able to help us do so (Scarry 1998). She points to *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and also E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India* as examples of novels that made

people (white people in the United States, and British people, respectively) imagine populations (the African American population and India's population, respectively), and lead to constitutional change (the 13th, 14th and 15th amendments to the U.S. Constitution, and the Independence of India Act of 1947). She adds, however, that such examples are extremely rare. However, if we lower the threshold somewhat and do not expect constitutional change, Plantinga adds many other examples in his recent book, e.g., the effect of films such as *Philadelphia* challenging people's prejudices against people with AIDS, arguably by inducing empathy with the main character, although Plantinga does not explicitly discuss this as empathic processes (Plantinga 2018, pp. 72–74, see also Carroll 2014). It is interesting that Bloom also discusses what might be mediated empathy in an earlier book, in which he writes that “it might well be that the greatest force underlying change in the last 30 years in the United States was the situation comedy” (Bloom 2013, p. 199). In an interview, Tamler Sommers asks Bloom about this view and his examples, such as *The Cosby Show* undermining racism and *Will & Grace* bringing people around to same-sex marriage. As Sommers argues, this seems to be undercutting Bloom's critique of empathy: the rational arguments for treating gay people on a par with heterosexual people were around before *Will & Grace*, but what made a difference is arguably that the audience empathized with the gay characters. As Sommers sums this up, “It was just like people were saying ‘Oh, OK, I don't feel that this is disgusting or weird or creepy or unnatural anymore. They're just normal people’. This is not a discovery of reason, that's familiarity and empathy” (Sommers 2016, p. 224). Bloom's reply is that his view is “interestingly nuanced” (Bloom cited in Sommers 2016, p. 224). Another way to put this, however, is that this is a potential beneficial effect of empathy that both he and Prinz ignore. Empathy may not be a reliable guide to morality due to its parochial nature, but one can capitalize on this very same bias towards the familiar by making what may appear unfamiliar familiar. Empathy with specific characters in a story can induce understanding for and connection with that individual, and by extension ever so slowly contribute to changing perceptions of a group. I am not arguing that stories make us better at empathizing overall, or better human beings overall. “There is no evidence for fictions capacity to . . . make (empathy) the servant of a principled morality”, Gregory Currie points out (Currie 2016, p. 58). What I do argue is that experiences of empathy with characters belonging to out-groups can extend our social circle and in that respect make us more empathic towards other people in that group. Murray Smith makes a similar point when he argues that empathy can be “stretched and refined through its engagement by the narrative arts”, and suggests that one such way to refine empathy is to extend its scope (Smith 2011b, p. 111). What seems to be of central importance here is the way a story can give intimate access to a character, thus making the reader or spectator feel like they truly get to know these characters. This is one way of taking advantage of empathy's proximity effects.

Another way empathy can contribute to moral change, related to this point, is found in the literature on restorative justice, which will be an aside here so I will merely sketch it briefly. In restorative justice, the guiding principle is rehabilitation of the offender, not punishment, typically sought through personal communication with their victims. This communication can be imagined, e.g., in the offender rehabilitation programmes described by Tony Ward and Russil Durrant, in which sexual assault offenders are asked to write victim accounts of the assault and participate in role playing their own victim during the assault (Ward and Durrant 2014, p. 213). They point out that practitioners typically remark on the effect of this so-called empathy module, and that “many offenders regard it as a turning point in their life” (Ward and Durrant 2014, p. 213)<sup>4</sup> In some experimental schemes personal encounters between victim and offenders are set up. Sommers discusses some such schemes, though which victim-offender mediation is offered, for example. Martha Nussbaum too holds up restorative practices as a preferable alternative to retributive punishment (Nussbaum 2016, p. 200ff). Although Nussbaum is cautious to point out that such schemes should not replace traditional impartial justice, she does use them as an example of a practice in which what she sees as the corrosive element of payback in our legal system is overcome in favour of a more benign, empathic approach. One foundational text for retributive justice is a paper by criminologist Nils Christie, who argues that a major problem in modern criminal legal systems is that they steal the conflict from the victims: e.g., in trials, the depersonalization and delegation of the conflict to trained lawyers prevent both victim and offender from learning, growing and moving on (Christie 1977). Restorative justice takes aim at the depersonalized, impartial and, in Sommers’s words, “excessively rationalistic nature of the current legal system” (Sommers 2018, p. 171), and emphasizes the need for the legal system to enable the affected parties in the conflict to communicate. The relevance here is that such personal encounters might foster empathy, whereas the depersonalized and impartial trial perhaps does so to a lesser extent. As such, restorative practice might be one way for the legal system to build on the partiality of empathy and its potential for moral growth.

Finally, in order to return to Prinz and Bloom, they both argue as if empathy is something we can get rid of, or avoid; as if empathy could simply be eliminated or surgically removed. However, empathy is part of our mental make-up. We can certainly be aware of its limitations, and counteract its parochial tendencies when necessary. However, to avoid empathy seems like asking humans to avoid emotions due to the biases of emotions, or avoid reason due to the biases inherently found in human reasoning. Indeed, just as empathy has its pitfalls, so have emotions, which Prinz holds up as a more reliable foundation for morality, and rationality, which is Bloom’s alternative solution. Prinz addresses this counterargument: “all moral emotions have a dark side: anger can lead to unbridled aggression,

disgust can be overly sensitive to the unfamiliar, contempt can be used to buttress boundaries between economic classes” (Prinz 2011b, p. 229). He goes on to list problems with other moral emotions, too, such as guilt and shame, and points out that these emotions are all prone to proximity effects, just as empathy is. However, he argues that because empathy’s function is to align emotions of people in close relationships, it is intrinsically biased in a way these moral emotions are not. But haven’t these moral emotions also evolved in order to secure cooperation between people living in small groups? Prinz goes on to argue that the partiality bias found in moral emotions such as guilt and anger “may derive from empathy, rather than from these emotions themselves” (Prinz 2011b, p. 229), and the biases of moral emotions are easier to overcome than the biases of empathy because their “proper objects are action-types, not individuals” (Prinz 2011b, p. 229). However, no evidence for this claim is presented, and I cannot see why one should accept the claim that moral emotions are any less biased than empathy, especially if subscribing to the view that moral emotions have evolved to secure cooperation in small groups, as is the commonly held view in moral psychology. What Prinz and Bloom want to argue against is the biased nature of human beings, but it is not clear that empathy alone should be singled out as the culprit.

Bloom sees rationality as a more reliable guide to morality than empathy and emotions. However, one problem here is that reason, too, is often inherently biased. Kahneman and Tversky point to a series of biases in our reasoning, and just for illustrative purposes, the list of cognitive biases on Wikipedia includes well over 100 different named biases. Bloom admits that the research supporting the heuristics and biases approach is robust, and discusses these biases as “mind bugs”. For example, he points out that “people often get confused when presented with problems expressed in terms of statistical probabilities and abstract scenarios . . . which is just what we would expect based on the circumstances under which our minds have evolved” (Bloom 2016, pp. 228–229). He goes on to discuss the importance of self-control (Bloom 2016, pp. 234–235). In conclusion, one could say that when Bloom simply counters problems inherent to reasoning by stating that we can override our biases, why not grant the same to empathy?

### **Learning from the antihero series**

Let’s now return to my two examples from antihero series. I began this chapter by demonstrating that antihero series can thwart our moral evaluation through manipulating empathy. Now, however, I am going to argue that we can also deliberately use empathy to extend our social circle and change our moral views. It will be remembered that we tend to perceive Tony as morally preferable to Dr Kennedy. When I try to demonstrate that

our moral evaluation of this episode is skewed, I encourage my reader to flesh out their imaginings about Dr Kennedy:

What if Dr Kennedy is somehow inattentive toward his patient because he is going through a divorce? Or what if being forced to take better care of Junior means that some other poor cancer patient, like the ageing charity worker Eva, who has no relatives to fight for her interests, gets less attention? Would this not entirely change our perception of Tony when he threatens Dr Kennedy on the golf course?

(Vaage 2016, p. 46)

Indeed, I think adding any such backstory in this episode could have represented a severe challenge to our liking Tony and seeing him as morally preferable – it might have been a crude awakening, seeing this favoured character be an unreasonable, selfish thug. A related move in relation to *Breaking Bad* is interesting: there was much vitriol against antihero Walter White's wife Skyler, whom I argue does appear unsympathetic because she is holding her husband back from the transgressions that the spectator enjoys, among other factors. Jason Mittell argues against the Skyler haters that she surely deserves our sympathy. In order to back up this view, he asks us to imagine the events in *Breaking Bad* from her point of view:

if we retell the series focusing primarily on Skyler's character's arc, *Breaking Bad* becomes a very different type of gendered tale, offering a melodramatic account of deception, adultery, and ultimately an abusive, dangerous marriage.

(Mittell 2015, p. 254)

I did as told: I re-watched the entire series and deliberately tried to focus on how Skyler must feel. I did not like Skyler on a first-time viewing, but watching the series again and imagining what it is like to be her does change my perception, and it is easy to agree that she is morally preferable to Walter. Of course she is. On a second-time viewing, I felt guilty for disliking her so much initially. However, it takes quite an effort to empathize with Skyler, as very little access is given to her. The spectator would have to rely on very deliberate, imaginative empathy in order to feel with her.

It is interesting that the method I thus implicitly make use of in my discussion of the antihero is similar to methods advocated by proponents of empathy in moral philosophy. In one paper, for example, Antti Kauppinen argues although immediate empathy is prone to partiality and is therefore unreliable, the answer is not to shut out empathy but to counteract empathic biases and use what he discusses as ideal-regulated empathy, namely “an affective response to the perceived situation of another that is regulated by reference to an ideal perspective” (Kauppinen 2014, p. 98). Ideal-regulated empathy



is to try to modify one's empathic response so that it could be shared by others – if they, too, are willing to be reasonable. Because we know that empathy is biased towards the familiar, the here and now and the visible, we need to down-regulate our empathic response to those familiar or similar to us, and up-regulate empathic responses to distant or different others.

Note here that both Kauppinen and Prinz work in a Humean tradition, and their starting point is Hume's position on morality (moral judgments are based on sentiments of approbation or disapprobation). I will not explore this link here, but the background for Kauppinen's argument is that Hume, too, was aware of the biases of empathy and argued that we could counteract them by adopting the "common point of view" (Kauppinen 2014, p. 109), or what Prinz refers to as the "general point of view" (Prinz 2011b, p. 228). Hume's solution to this problem with empathy is dismissed by Prinz as unsatisfying because we rarely adopt such a point of view. However, this is in many ways what I intuitively did when I tried to re-evaluate Tony vs. Dr Kennedy, and Walter vs. Skyler. Another way to put this is that we can 'up-regulate' empathy with distant others by deliberately trying to imagine what it is like to be them by use of imaginative empathy. It takes an effort, but by doing so, our evaluation of the characters will probably be more reliable and reasonable: as this is a reflective, imaginative project, it will most likely be influenced by one's moral principles to a greater degree. Whereas embodied empathy is prone to all kinds of errors and biases, imaginative empathy can arguably be more principally informed, and result in a more considered response. When imagining being Skyler, for example, I am much more likely to be able to articulate the moral principles I am making use of when evaluating the characters. My imagining is informed by explicit reasoning about moral principles (slow thinking in the dual-processing model) to a greater degree.

Bloom discusses Scarry's solution to overcome the weaknesses of empathy that is somewhat similar, namely to try to "*make yourself less weighty*. Bring everyone to the same level by diminishing yourself. Put yourself, and those you love, on the level of strangers" (Bloom 2016, pp. 108–109, emphasis original). Scarry points to Bertrand Russell and John Rawls as developing such methods, e.g., in Russell's advice that we rotate nouns when reading the newspaper (substituting names of foreign countries with one's own), or Rawls's veil of ignorance as creating equality by imagined weightlessness, i.e., my own perspective cannot weigh more heavily because I am ignorant about my own position in an imagined society. However, Scarry's main argument is that either way, imagining others is difficult, and even the proposed antidote is demanding, so our response to others should not rely on our capacity and willingness to imagine: we need constitutional laws to "uphold cosmopolitan values", she concludes (Scarry 1998, p. 110). Politically, it is easy to agree. Relatedly, the question of learning from the antihero series is tricky: there is the potential to learn something about our



moral psychological make-up from the puzzled state the series leaves us in (why do I like this horrible character so much?), but only if one is willing to reflect.

In conclusion, we cannot simply get rid of empathy, as it is part and parcel of human nature. We can, however, be aware of its shortcomings, and make sure we try to counteract its biases. Imaginative empathy can be one way to do this, when used to enhance understanding for those we do not yet know. Indeed, if the antihero series can make us empathize with murdering drug kingpins by making them familiar to us over time and emphasizing what is similar to us (e.g., their family lives and the challenges of everyday life that we all recognize), surely stories can be used to extend empathy to truly distant and different others, as well. Empathy may be biased and unreliable, but can easily be manipulated – for morally bad but also potentially morally good effects.<sup>5</sup>

## Notes

- 1 For an excellent overview, see Kahneman (2011).
- 2 See also Coplan (2006).
- 3 In earlier works, both Prinz and Bloom seem more positively inclined towards empathy (Bloom 2013; Prinz 2007). I will not discuss this further here.
- 4 They nevertheless go on to argue that there is little direct evidence that this then inhibits offenders from committing sexual offences, and discuss multiple reasons for why these empathic experiences do not translate to prosocial behaviour.
- 5 This chapter was presented at a workshop on Empathy and the Arts at the University of York in September 2018 and at the Conversations on Empathy: an Interdisciplinary Encounter workshop at the University of Kent in 2019. I thank participants for helpful comments and suggestions on both occasions, and also the editors for their thoughtful feedback on drafts.

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## 7 Cultivating an empathic impulse in wartime Ukraine

*Catherine Wanner and Valentyna Pavlenko*

The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine that began on 24 February 2022 was preceded by an eight-year hybrid war. Ukrainians consider the 2022 invasion an intensification of armed combat, not its beginning. A hybrid war differs from a conventional war in that it involves low-grade, ongoing violence in multiple forms. Along with military hardware, in a hybrid war, disinformation and deception are weaponized to undermine peace, social solidarity, and any sense of individual or communal well-being. The use of such means to resurrect political domination and neo-colonial means of governing are effective because the media rarely recognize such slow, covert forms of violence, even when they are methodically pursued. As a result, a hybrid war courts little response from the international community beyond verbal scolding. Unconventional warfare calls for unconventional weapons in response.

This article analyzes how, when faced with a steady onslaught of aggression during a hybrid war from 2014–2022, empathy was mobilized and weaponized to confront and endure the stresses and horrors of war. In Ukraine, military chaplains emerged as key agents charged with initiating empathic processes that served dual and diametrically opposed purposes to facilitate the will to endure war among soldiers and civilians alike. Empathy became a form of soft power used to win a hard, hybrid war. Beyond weapons, empathy – understood as the ability to imagine, grasp, and anticipate the thoughts, feelings, and sensations of others – constitutes a potentially incisive edge. In this case, it was a weapon of the weak, but one that was highly effective. We offer an analysis as to how and why military chaplains continue to be key agents charged with cultivating an empathic impulse that pivots from fostering in-group solidarity among soldiers and co-nationals by drawing on certain forms of sociality to identifying and excluding a radical enemy Other in the name of morally empowered defense of the homeland. This article draws on ethnographic research Wanner has conducted on everyday religiosity since 2014, which included in-depth interviews with eight chaplains, and ongoing research Pavlenko has conducted as a Ukraine-based

social psychologist on perceptions of ethnicity, social solidarity, and conflict mediation in Eastern Ukraine.<sup>1</sup>

The armed combat that began in 2014 in Eastern Ukraine between Russian-backed separatists and the Armed Forces of Ukraine was considered a hybrid war for several reasons. First, there was never a formal declaration of war, which means that there were never clearly defined sides. Second, the weaponry used to inflict violence went far beyond guns to include cyberattacks, disinformation, deep fakes, and other forms of deception to create ‘alternative facts’ for the purposes of political manipulation and undermining truth and trust. Two additional factors enabled this hybrid war, that was not called a war, and animated the presence of a dangerous enemy Other and yet simultaneously shattered the prospect of clearly identifying who that radical enemy Other was. First, in this hybrid war, fighting forces not only included soldiers affiliated with state-sponsored armies, but also foreign and domestic volunteer fighters and mercenaries. Among the prisoners and corpses, Americans, Canadians, Brazilians, and Serbs turned up. Second, this daily cocktail of conventional warfare, subterfuge, and destruction was financed not only by states but by crowdsourcing and by powerful and wealthy individuals, all of whom had vested political and economic interests in a particular outcome. These factors combined to articulate a clear and palpable threat to Ukrainian sovereignty, which destroyed a sense of security. These unusual circumstances also hampered the ability to effectively respond to the (sometimes non-physical) violence ‘they’ were inflicting on ‘us’ through the manipulation of information and images.

This hybrid war produced neither the single casualty that was perceived as a tragedy, nor a torrent of deaths that became statistics. Rather, it delivered a handful of dead and wounded combatants on a daily basis. This, however, was sufficient to deny the possibility of peace. The daily stream of casualties and quotidian dose of destruction added up to over 14,000 dead, nearly two million people internally displaced within Ukraine and another one million displaced to Russia, and much of the country’s infrastructure destroyed. This was the backdrop against which the Russian invasion of Ukraine started on 24 February 2022. Years of bombardments in a hybrid war had turned the infrastructure of a region once known as the ‘cradle of the proletariat’ to rubble, rendering much of the region unappealing or even uninhabitable. Since the invasion, the massive costs of rebuilding not just the eastern regions of Ukraine where occupation had been long-standing, but now most of the basic infrastructure of the country, make the recovery from political violence a long-term endeavor.

Mercenaries played a significant role in the hybrid Russo-Ukrainian conflict, especially early on, because this was a proxy war to address tensions elsewhere. Georgians were still smarting from the Russian invasion and annexation of their territory in 2008. They teamed up with Chechen fighters, who perennially mount a secessionist campaign from the Russian Federation that is inevitably brutally crushed. Some members of both groups have



joined Ukrainian forces in an attempt to strike a blow at Russia, whereas others from exactly the same groups express their pro-Russian allegiance by fighting on the separatist side.

An international border between Russia and Ukraine has only existed since 1991. Even then, for quite some time, much of the border was only a line on the map. It remained unmarked and unmonitored on the ground. After armed combat began in 2014, however, a fiercely real, new iron curtain of a physical border has been built to separate Russians from Ukrainians. Connections, relationships, and networks of all kinds – and the infrastructure that supported them – have been destroyed. When armed combat ceases, now not just the eastern Donbas regions of Ukraine, but all of Ukraine, is likely to become another ‘frozen conflict’ zone, like those that emerged in Transdnistria in Moldova in 1992 and Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia in 2008. These other former Soviet republics-turned-independent states have also struggled to establish state sovereignty. In these regions, tensions continue to simmer and threaten renewed violence at any moment, even though active armed combat has ceased. Violence was only quelled after the erection of a physical border. These barriers severed connections and contact, but rarely delivered peace, much like the barriers that separate North and South Korea, Israelis and Palestinians, and Indian-Pakistani disputed territories in Kashmir.

During the hybrid war that preceded the invasion of 2022, it was clear that Russian President Vladimir Putin’s regime was the enabler of this ongoing armed combat. Yet, some Ukrainians from the Donbas region unquestionably fought for secession from Ukraine over grievances they had with what they saw as discriminatory and otherwise ill-advised policies of the Ukrainian state. Other Ukrainians, however, fought with the Ukrainian Army against these separatist forces. This gave the conflict a prominent civil dimension fueled by genuine disagreements over the future of the country’s political orientation. A bifurcated choice emerged that starkly posited either maintaining the historic alliance between Russia and Ukraine, which had made them, in Putin’s famous and oft-repeated formulation, ‘one people.’ The other option was to aspire to be recognized as fully European. This would allow Ukraine to formally join European governing structures, such as the European Union. This implied, in some instances, adopting legislation, laws, and cultural conventions that have little grass-roots support in Ukraine in exchange for the prospect of political and geopolitical stability, and presumably the promise of wealth that being European might offer.

This means that perceptions of who is an unwanted Other that does not belong involve multiple amorphous groups loosely bifurcated into those who sympathize with the political vision and form of governance the Russian state offers and those who do not.<sup>2</sup> The key point is that post-war reconciliation will have to be among Ukrainians every bit as much as it will have to be between Russians and Ukrainians. How might empathy be deployed to mediate conflicts and reduce tensions under such circumstances

when radical otherness is manifest in the repugnant politicized views of neighbors, kin, and colleagues? After the full-scale invasion, the radical otherness of Russian citizens – and for some, even all Russians – was laid bare by their acceptance of their leaders’ political ambitions that include imperial reconstitution through violent means.

We explain why in this particular cultural and political context, military chaplains are effective agents capable of developing empathic impulses that respond to the multiple challenges of war. At once they are able to cultivate empathy that heightens exclusionary dynamics that serve to morally validate and accelerate violence toward members of the designated enemy out-group. At the same time, much of the work chaplains did in the initial phases of hybrid war was oriented toward comforting the civilian population, which served to sustain support for the armed forces and for the postservice care of veterans. Derek Gregory has called such interventions “armed social work” (2008). Among the civilian population in the early years of the hybrid war, the woundedness that arose was not from combat or other violent action; rather, it came from the inability or unwillingness of Russians and other pro-Russian Ukrainian sympathizers to imagine their feelings of betrayal at being attacked. This inability to read, or deliberately misread, each other manifest itself as inaction, which, in turn, was interpreted as indifference to violence and suffering in Ukraine. We focus specifically on the dual forms of inclusive and exclusive sociality military chaplains engender among soldiers and civilians, and specifically the empathic processes of imagination they use to create them.

### **Why military chaplains?**

The stated goal of the military chaplaincy is to “be close by” (“бути поруч” in Ukrainian), on the front as well as on the home front (Kalenychenko and Kokhanchuk 2017, p. 1). Given the shrill tone of political debate during this hybrid war, chaplains are asked to provide guidance on understanding the vexed interconnections among forgiveness, responsibility and “moral justice” (“моральна справедливість” in Ukrainian) and to offer assistance in responding to the suffering, destruction, and sacrifice the war has produced. Andriy Zelinsky, a military chaplain from the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, became the first chaplain to serve in a combat situation in Eastern Ukraine. He succinctly said, “If the task of the military is to win the war, the task of a military chaplain is to triumph over the war by achieving victory over the consequences of war in the human heart.”<sup>3</sup> How can this be done? How can some measure of humanity be retained in a situation of hybrid war?

Metropolitan Ioan of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine explains the role of chaplains as preserving “the humanity of soldiers so that they do not become indifferent to others” (Kovtunovych and Pryvalko 2019, p. 27). Recalling the famous dictum, “Love thy neighbour as thyself,” he differentiates the

appropriateness of anger towards what an enemy does from hatred for who an enemy is. He claims that,

we should not hate our enemies either – we only hate the evil they do. We destroy the enemy because he does not stop. He wants to enslave us. He does evil. This is the only thing that motivates us to destroy the enemy. A person should never humiliate another person or make fun of him, even if he is the enemy. The task of the chaplain is to prevent such things. A soldier should be proud, have dignity, but should not despise or underestimate the enemy. One should speak out against the enemy with anger, but not with hatred.

(Kovtunovych and Pryvalko 2019, p. 27)

In this way, chaplains encourage soldiers to see themselves as defenders of their rightful territory and not as men engaged in aggressive, offensive acts. As defenders, they are morally absolved of murder of co-nationals when they kill because they are fulfilling another, equally important moral mandate to defend the homeland against evil enemies. If, as we suggest, empathic engagement as part of relational care to create certain forms of sociality is a key function military chaplains provide in the war effort, both on the front and on the home front, chaplains are unique in the range of engagement they offer. They simultaneously use empathy to stimulate morally empowered in-group solidarity and out-group exclusion that can be used to heal or kill. Both serve military objectives.

Van Dijke et al.'s (2022) study of humanist chaplains finds that empathy is a core aspect of chaplaincy care, which they tightly summarize as attunement. By attunement, they wish to signal a presence approach that centers on attentively being there as a means to overcome the consequences of combat. By imagining or experiencing a co-presence, a relational connection is made that has the potential to be transformative. This makes the cultivation of empathy a learned skill and not a dispositional trait. For military chaplains, this includes learning to recognize biases, misunderstandings, and false projections so as to as accurately as possible co-feel with an interlocutor. Cultural norms and the particulars of a specific historic period, both of which today are increasingly informed by religiosity and war in Ukraine, shape how empathy is deployed and received to forge connections that can be parlayed into bonds of solidarity and commonality that draw on exclusion. When such connections move out of the realm of imagination into war, a channeling of hatred is a mandatory first step to taming hatred. Empathic processes that engage 'hearts and minds' also serve to redefine how forgiveness and the unforgivable, the grievable and ungrievable, are understood.<sup>4</sup>

The majority of Ukrainians and Russians share a common confessional tradition in Eastern Orthodoxy. Although Ukraine is a religiously diverse country, there are three prominent Eastern Christian religious institutions. Because they share a common Byzantine tradition, the multiple Eastern

Christian confessional groups in Ukraine are liturgically and doctrinally similar (Plokhy and Sysyn 2003; Krawchuk and Bremer 2016; Denysenko 2018; Wanner 2022). However, sharp distinctions exist among individual religious institutions in terms of the way they envision state sovereignty and nationhood, as well as which supreme ecclesiastical authority they recognize. In this way, religion in the army and in the chaplaincy mirrors its role in the society at large (Hassner 2014, p. 9).

The Orthodox Church of Ukraine, created in 2019 in response to this hybrid war, recognizes a patriarch in Kyiv, the capital of Ukraine, and is fully and independently self-governing. The Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP) is part of the Russian Orthodox Church, which means it is subordinate to the Moscow Patriarch as the ultimate religious leader for followers of this church in Ukraine. Finally, the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, with its Byzantine traditions that include married priests, is part of the Roman Catholic Church and recognizes the authority of the pope.

There are also sharp political differences among these three denominations. The Orthodox Church of Ukraine, like other Orthodox churches, subscribes to an ethno-religious model. It formed in response to the creation of an independent Ukrainian state and growing hostilities with Russia. The Russian Orthodox Church considers its canonical domain to be the historic territory of the Russian Empire, envisioning itself as the unifier of the Russian world (“русский мир” in Russian), meaning all Eastern Slavs as one people under one Church. This eviscerates the possibility of a separate Ukrainian nation and church. The Russian Orthodox Church was the only one of the three religious institutions that was allowed to exist in the former Soviet Union. The Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church was outlawed by the Soviet state from 1946–1989. During this period, with its five million adherents, it was the largest banned religious group in the world, which has fostered among its clergy and members sharp suspicion of any kind of political or religious union with Russia.

Moreover, these religious institutions are divided by their sources of support. The Orthodox Church associated with Moscow has the greatest amount of property, with over 12,000 parishes and three of the five most important monasteries for Eastern Slavs. The church allied with Kyiv has the greatest number of parishioners. Support for an independent church as a pillar in the fight to strengthen state sovereignty was strong enough to bring the church’s creation to fruition during the hybrid war. Since the 2022 invasion, support for this church, at the expense of the UOC-MP, has skyrocketed. Finally, the Greek Catholic Church predominates in Western Ukraine. It has the most committed members and engaged clergy in Ukraine and in the diaspora. All this means that each institution has a unique source of power and presence in society.

Prior to outbreak of armed combat in 2014, many Ukrainians were only dimly aware of the institutional affiliations of a particular church or

monastery because of the liturgical and aesthetic similarities among them and because the political stakes of charting a political future independent from Russia were far less contested (Naumescu 2007; Wanner 2014). Although religious institutions during the hybrid war were in frequent conflict and competition with one another to garner allegiance among believers, individuals by and large accepted this plurality and the ecumenicism of the chaplaincy. The very commonality of these different denominations – which all draw on an Eastern Christian, Byzantine faith tradition, and an all-male clergy – meant that chaplains had a generalized basis from which to foster trust. In addition, it is the wide spectrum of Protestant churches and Roman Catholic Churches, with their expansive, transnational networks, which each constitute less than 2% of the Ukrainian population, that have been the most influential in shaping the chaplaincy and supporting its growing presence in public institutions.

Clergy are held in surprisingly high regard in this society where cynicism and suspicion of people in positions of power are often the norm. This is because a broad cross-section of clergy from different denominations has a history of offered calming, motivational support, most recently to protesters during the Maidan protests of 2013–2014, which resulted in the ousting of a pro-Russian Ukrainian president. Clergy then shifted to providing the same to protesters-turned-enlisted soldiers in the Ukrainian army after armed combat broke out in Eastern Ukraine. The annexation of the Crimean Peninsula and the outbreak of separatist armed combat in Eastern Ukraine was the spark that prompted the remaking of the status of the military chaplaincy and the ad hoc way in which they served the armed forces simultaneously as they served in parish communities. On the heels of the Soviet period, when opportunities for theological education were negligible, the possibility to receive accredited training has expanded – but not at a tempo that matches the construction of new churches and the broad popular renewed embrace of religious identities, which has resulted in the rapid expansion of the clergy.

As of early 2020, about 400 military chaplains worked in an official capacity as employees of the Ministry of Defense.<sup>5</sup> The service of at least double that number of military chaplains was financed by individual denominations or parishes, if it was financed at all. These chaplains are called ‘volunteers’ because they do not receive the medical, pension, and legal protections that chaplains employed at the Ministry of Defense do. Clergy from the Moscow-affiliated Church are not allowed to serve as chaplains in an official capacity as employees of the Ministry of Defense. They can only serve as self-financed volunteers (Vovk 2020, pp. 35–43).<sup>6</sup> The concept of compassion fatigue among religiously motivated caregivers has been well documented (Caldwell 2004, 2017; Elisha 2011). For chaplains who volunteer and largely work alone, not having institutional allies or other forms of organizational and emotional support is particularly taxing in wartime conditions.



## Defining empathy

Empathy, understood as a genuine understanding of another that serves as the basis for mutual goodwill, is a surprisingly recent concept (Lanzoni 2018). In the late 19th century, Robert Visser proposed the concept of *Einfühlung*, or ‘feeling into’ something, to analyze the aesthetic experience of perceiving and sensing as it relates to viewing art. Looking at mountains or columns, he argued, often left the viewer feeling uplifted. Conversely, viewing sharp angles could prompt feelings of anger and tension in the viewer. In the early 20th century, American psychologists began to replace aesthetic images and decorative objects with people, and specifically facial expressions, to further study the connections between perceptions, sensations, and experiences. Instead of art, they asked, what kind of an experience is generated when a person perceives the thoughts and emotions of another person? Which sensations does a viewer feel then? Psychologists studied how, upon seeing a person with a sad facial expression, a viewer might be prompted to feel along with that person by recalling his or her own feelings of sadness at a particular moment in the past. When inspired to feel sadness along with another person, an experience of connectivity with that person results. This process of perceiving–sensing–experiencing as an emotional response became known as empathy. It rises to a collective, shared level, for example, when a particular group of people view the same images, symbols, sounds, and other aesthetics anchored in a particular confessional tradition.

Debates remain as to whether empathy is a personality trait or a process. The difference is significant. Conceiving of empathy in processual terms – as military chaplains, therapists, and other caregivers clearly do – means that active intervention can expand and deepen empathic impulses and responses, which can shape a repertoire of emotional attitudes that ultimately inform behavior. Such processes can be integrated into the workings of secular and religious institutions in pursuit of specific strategic aims in a way that is substantially easier than grappling with the reactions that individual personality traits might provoke. This begins to explain why military chaplains, as specific actors, initiate processes to cultivate empathic impulses, albeit ones that are adapted to different groups in response to their diverse needs at this specific historic moment of war.

Importantly, empathic processes also include imaginative, cognitive, and affective elements. Jodi Halpern (2001) refined the intersection of empathy and institutions when she considered how healthcare providers can use empathy to better understand patients and clients, a process that is somewhat parallel to how chaplains relate to soldiers and civilians. Halpern suggests empathy hinges on an interactive process where one person makes an effort to *imagine* the thoughts and feelings of another person. If a listener consciously uses his/her own emotional associations – aware of the propensity to project one’s own unacknowledged emotions, assumptions, and understandings on to another – to provide a context for imagining



the distinct experiences of another person, then an empathic reaction in the form of a connection can result that is neither “detached concern” nor “sympathetic merging” (Halpern 2001, p. 68). Especially those who have studied empathy beyond a caregiving capacity have recognized that this process is perilous. The act of imagining another’s experience can be inaccurate, biased, or downright misleading. Empathy is not necessarily a moral virtue. The knowledge accrued through empathic imaginings and the trust it can generate may be put to many uses that are neither morally virtuous nor morally neutral. In what follows, we explore the essential steps in forging trust that allows for the unleashing of imagination as an essential first step in empathic encounters before analyzing the consequences of these encounters.

### **On the front**

For empathy to emerge, a person needs to move away from their own positionality, engage the Other, and non-judgmentally observe and listen, which already introduces the possibility of error. Alessandro Duranti points out that the crux of an empathetic intersubjective experience rests on the act of changing places (2010, p. 21). Esra Özyürek (2018, also in this volume) sharpens this by tying trading places to the concept of *Paarung*, or pairing. She stresses the importance of social positioning and the political dynamics of a particular historical moment, which affect trading places, or as she calls it in this volume, “swapping shoes.” No one can ever directly know another person’s experiences, thoughts, and feelings, let alone in the context of war where there is clear and present danger, crushing loss of life, brutality, and sharp power differentials. Maintaining a certain distance while remaining immersed in another’s lifeworld, which military chaplains attempt to achieve by accompanying soldiers in an unranked capacity in combat without carrying weapons, is essential to creating the deep empathic understanding of a soldier’s experience that chaplains claim to have. To cultivate trust, chaplains provide liturgical and counseling services at the front with the goal of pairing with soldiers so that they, in turn, can pair with God, which ideally cultivates the capacity for subsequent pairings.

Empathic engagement through a succession of pairings – chaplain with soldier, soldier with God, soldier with other soldiers, and soldiers with enemy Others – can be challenging to initiate if encounters include mutual perceptions colored with suspicion and judgment of radical otherness. Some soldiers are convinced atheists and are not willing to trust or engage with chaplains and their radical other Gods and supernatural forces. Although there is an old saying in this part of the world, “There are no atheists on the front,” many chaplains spoke of a vacuous spirituality among soldiers that translates into a lack of willingness to appeal to, let alone pair with, God or other higher forces. Douglas Hollan suggests that an empathetic process “unfolds, in the transitional space between those who seek to understand and those who can still imagine being understood” (2008, p. 484).

Trust, willingness, and imagination are essential, among chaplains and soldiers alike, to create the two-sided openness to pair and swap perspectives through co-feeling.

In the context of war, not everyone is willing or able to have another person imagine the thoughts and feelings they harbor. As one chaplain from the Orthodox Church of Ukraine said of his efforts to earn the trust of soldiers,

Right after you arrive there, you must first convince them that you are sincere, that you won't betray them, that you believe in them, and that you can help them. To do this, you have to communicate with them on equal footing. Do not stand above them or try to adapt to them. Be like them and be together with them. Then they will begin to trust you.

(quoted in Kovtunovych and Pryvalko 2019, p. 333)

This is not an easy task. Armies and religious institutions are notoriously hierarchical institutions. In order for empathy to take root by experiencing a connection in the course of relational care, an affective response in the form of trust must emerge, followed by a cognitive decision to be willing to be understood, and the marshaling of imagination to envision another's experience.

What happens when someone refuses to allow themselves to be understood and refuses to swap shoes? This reaction can be motivated by indifference, fear, or some other emotion that impedes the willingness to reexperience sensations in the process of retelling them. Can empathetic processes be initiated if emotional states and experiences yield silence? The very essence of trauma, and indeed its defining characteristic, is that the trauma itself eludes articulation (Felman and Laub 1992). There are no words to describe the sensations felt, so deeply are they inscribed on the body. Military chaplains are trained to lead rituals and ritualized behaviors, which provides a means of non-verbal expression. Although words and behaviors are largely scripted in a ritual context, they are nonetheless a form of communication that can provide a starting point for dialogue. Rituals often tell a story. Those who cannot speak can still partake in a narrative by conveying thoughts and emotions in postures and gestures.

The affective aspect of an experience of empathy, with its spur to action, gives empathy an ethical dimension with political implications (Strauss 2004, p. 434; Hollan 2008, p. 484). Affective empathic connections, once fostered in soldiers, can be used in two distinct ways, depending on the context and with whom they are pairing. The first is "tactical empathy," a term we borrow from Bubandt and Willerslev (2015, p. 6). In a combat situation, military chaplains tactically use empathy to secure an advantage in combat. After chaplain-soldier and soldier-God pairings occur, additional pairings among soldiers, and then with enemy soldiers, are intended to make for more efficient fighters. They create empathic impulses of solidarity with in-group members through co-feeling. By simultaneously unleashing

imaginative powers to see and feel the lifeworld and options of enemy soldiers, which allows soldiers to radically other them by denying their humanity, it becomes easier to attack. Although we tend to think of empathy in a morally positive light, or at least neutral terms, the ability to empathically imagine the feelings, thoughts, and experiences of an enemy soldier can also be used to harm, and in this instance, even to kill. Throop (in this volume) states quite flatly, “Empathy can be directly implicated in efforts to harm others, cause them pain, humiliate them, shame them, embarrass them, or violate them.”

When empathic processes are used to underline the importance of solidarity, they can also serve to engender submission and conformity to authority among members of a single group. Some high-ranking chaplains complained that military officers expect them to tactically use the trust and rapport they have developed with soldiers to more effectively manipulate them into obeying commands. Interpersonal connections and attachments created by trust and imagination leading to empathic engagement do not always contribute to compassion. They can be used to manipulate and reinforce conformity and loyalty.

Strengthening empathy for the suffering of one’s own group can entrench the exclusion of others and license violence toward them. This is more likely to happen when tropes of victimhood, martyrdom, and sacrifice are mobilized, as is the case in this war, to commemorate death. In this particular conflict, these dynamics could ultimately serve to intensify and prolong tensions between neighboring peoples, even long after the war is over.

The U.S. and Australian armed forces not only recognize, but have even blatantly advocated, the use of empathy as a weapon of war as part of the armed services cultural turn. Bubandt and Willerslev argue that “tactical empathy” ensues when “the empathetic incorporation of an alien perspective contains, and in fact is motivated by, seduction, deception, manipulation, and violent intent” (2015, p. 6). The Petraeus Doctrine of counterinsurgency, which was operative during the U.S. invasion of Iraq, asserts that conflicts are increasingly waged *among* civilian populations instead of *around* them. (Vizzard and Capron 2010, p. 488, emphasis added). This underlines the importance the armed forces have recognized of empathically imagining the needs of civilian populations as a means to fulfill their military objectives (Stone 2018). Similarly, Sarah Russell-Farnham has advised the Australian Defence Force to develop empathy as a combat capability among soldiers through the study of anthropology to build cultural awareness (2009; Pleasant 2019). The empathy that chaplains develop as part of their rapport with soldiers is also meant to fortify the empathic capacity of soldiers to imagine the inclinations and orientations of enemy combatants. The insight empathic imagination and mimetic labor might provide has the potential to more efficiently secure victory by making soldiers more lethal fighters. Empathy for a radical enemy Other that co-mingles with violence in a test of dominance reminds us of de Waal’s ‘Russian doll’ model of empathy (2007). What

begins with chaplain-soldier engagement in empathic encounters that trade on relational care and sympathetic support yields additional layers. As each of the parties feel into the Other, their empathetic encounters have potentialities of an entirely different tenor, illustrating the full spectrum of consequences the work of military chaplains as singular agents of empathy return.

### **Serving on the home front**

When chaplains rotate from the front to the home front, the nature of their work shifts. Military chaplains engage in various forms of outreach and social service provision that include forming support groups on the local level for people dealing with death, addiction, and poverty. They cultivate leadership skills among youth. They provide spiritual counseling for the sick, disabled, and elderly. These initiatives place them in state-run social institutions to respond to a variety of social, emotional, and physical needs. This means that the war, and the subsequent expansion of the military chaplaincy, moves clergy far beyond the front lines and the parish and makes them agents of social change. The integrated presence of chaplains and religiosity in public social institutions begins to change the values and sensibilities those institutions create and sustain.

The infrastructure that religious institutions offer – not just meeting places and hierarchical authority structures, but also ritualized, symbolic and aesthetic forms of communication – provide a base from which to cultivate dialogue and empathy as a starting point to address myriad social problems in a spiritual, a therapeutic, and yet a tangible material, secular way. The trust that clergy and soldiers enjoyed while the country was engaged in a hybrid war, and even more so after the full Russian invasion began in 2022, is key to unlocking empathic processes. Against the backdrop of war, the loss of territory and a heightened sense of vulnerability, addressing the fears and concerns of the population at large, becomes a task laden with what Wanner has called therapeutic religiosity (2021). This refers to the techniques, which include dialogue-based empathic engagement, grounded in religious worldviews and spiritual practices that are therapeutically applied to bring about a desired transformation of an emotional, bodily, or psychic nature.

On the home front, part of a chaplain's job is to cultivate a politically useful empathic impulse among civilian populations toward soldiers who serve in the armed forces and, secondarily, among fellow citizens who might consider each other's political views repugnant and hazardous to the sovereignty of the Ukrainian state. Chaplains attempt to cultivate an empathic impulse toward soldiers and civilian victims through interfaith, ecumenical work in an increasingly militarized and pluralist society. Soldiers are celebrated as defenders. Making heroes of soldiers and lionizing their sacrifices renders them worthy of veneration and feeds the notion of reciprocal obligation. Acknowledging the offenses that led to death, is, as Gobodo-Madikizela writes, is "a sign of ethical responsibility toward the other. It

invites reflection on the historical circumstances that divide, and continue to divide, individuals and groups who are trying to heal from a violent and hateful past” (2008, p. 344; see also Kirmayer 2008). To grapple with the divisions and mistrust, even hatred, that war or indifference produced, chaplains try to provoke people into empathizing with one another and into co-feeling each other’s experiences.

A good bit of the political work chaplains do is to encourage the greater Ukrainian population to understand soldiers as ‘defenders,’ as moral exemplars pursuing the common good. Compatriots owe soldiers given the sacrifices they have made in the name of defending sovereignty. Several scholars have suggested that empathic connections arise through dialogue and storytelling (Gobodo-Madikizela 2008; Throop 2010, p. 772; Zembylas 2013). Commemorations can be a performative means to enact a story that can provoke new perspectives, sensations, and understandings often in pursuit of a political goal. In 2015, a new commemorative holiday on 14 October became Defenders of Ukraine Day. It is laden with historical and religious symbolism that links current political goals with an aura of religion. It features a nationalized historical narrative that includes a Cossack warring heritage and celebrates the role they played in defending Ukrainian lands. Since the 12th century, this day has been an important Orthodox feast day, the Day of Protection of the Mother of God. A less mythical – albeit not less mythologized – historical moment, the anniversary of the founding of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA), is also commemorated on this day. The UPA was an armed group that fought against the Soviet Red Army during World War II to achieve Ukrainian independence. Chaplains are integral actors in commemorations laden with multilayered historical, military, and religious nuance. They bless the defenders of Ukraine and cast the nation and state in a sacred aura, absolving soldiers for atrocities committed during war and ritually communicating an obligation that the civilian population has to reciprocate the debt created by the sacrifices of soldiers.

Positioning soldiers as defenders demonstrates how civilians should relate to them. Chaplains try to generate empathy for these defenders in their post-service life. They frequently return disfigured, disabled, and still without a clear victory. This mandates a frank discussion about the reality of war, which few want to hear. Different techniques and tactics are needed to create empathy for the experiences of those who fought, and especially those who died, and for the suffering their sacrifice has brought to their families and friends. For many reasons, both cultural and economic, a one-child family became and remains the norm in Ukraine. Therefore, when a soldier is killed in combat, for parents, this means the end of family life. The loss has ramifications not only in the present in terms of grief but in the future as well in terms of impending economic difficulties. There’s an old saying: “Better one hundred friends than one hundred rubles.” Children are valuable on many levels. Aloneness heightens the vulnerability of a precarious life. Given the current state of social service provision and economic



instability in Ukraine, most people count on their children to provide post-retirement elderly care, which is shattered when a child dies.

In Lviv, a western Ukrainian city, military chaplains provide monthly services at the most historic cemetery in Lviv, where soldiers from this region killed in combat are buried in a special section dedicated to them which is characterized by an endless sea of graves. The plethora of standardized gravestone memorials is the materiality with which the war's mass dimensions is communicated. And yet, the tremendous personalization of those same identical gravesites marks each soldier as a son, husband, father, or all of these. The material manifestation of death in its national and individual dimensions aims to illicit an empathic reaction to sacrifice among the city's residents. This form of material commemoration creates a sense of familiarity with fallen soldiers. Not just Benedict Anderson's unknown soldier is capable of helping people imagine the nation, but those we know through photographs and the gravesite material objects that personify them. These images help people imagine their compatriots and create the connections and bonds of attachment that make solidarity with soldiers possible.

Once a month, people meet at the cemetery for a ceremony for the dead ("панахида" in Ukrainian), followed by prayers and the incessant repetition of chants of "вічна йому пам'ять" (eternal memory to him). For people who cannot articulate the loss they have sustained – and therefore cannot engage in dialogue – they can nonetheless recall prayers memorized in childhood and perform scripted gestures on cue collectively. This can become a bonding form of communication among soldiers' family members, creating a collective of people feeling into each other's suffering. Scripted actions and the performance of long-memorized prayers are for some the only way to articulate the pain of loss. Because these forms of discourse are ritualized, they become possible. Potentially, they can stave off the morphing of grief into rage that Renato Rosaldo describes so well in "Grief and the Headhunter's Rage" (1989). Some tend graves by placing flowers, photos, and incense. Doing something for the departed is a way to feel the presence of someone who is absent, lessening the burden of trying to imagine them as present. Even though each tends to their own soldier's grave, they do it together at the same time, which is a form of dialogue through collective action.

This cemetery, and the monthly gathering of family and friends there, much like commemorations, is the realization of the poet Ol'ga Berggol'ts' famous World War II axiom of "No one is forgotten. Nothing is forgotten." The value of these gatherings, which function as something of a therapeutic support group, is in evidence by the fact that three families, after having lost a son, have decided to adopt children. Adoption is fairly stigmatized in Ukraine, thanks to unexamined stereotypes that only someone dishonorable would abandon a child. Other people who have lost a son in war have volunteered to provide backup care for the new parents, demonstrating that a community of mourners has arisen.



## Chaplains and the fight against Indifference

The Garrison Church in Lviv, which houses the military chaplaincy of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, is also involved in trying to frame the meaning of sacrifice so that people will not indifferently look away. The Church houses an ongoing exhibit on the war.<sup>7</sup> Interspersed below icons and incense burners within the Garrison Church are spent rockets, grenades, and other discarded military weaponry. The used weapons are presented side by side with portraits of human casualties to evoke emotional reactions that trigger a cognitive recognition of the need for and actual efforts of defense that are underway. As at the cemetery, enormous efforts are made to personalize the dead. Not only are there portraits of local men who have died, there are large, closeup facial photos of young children in traditional dress. The biographical details that accompany the photos create a sense of familiarity and tragedy that is intended to stir empathy and support for soldiers as defenders of threatened children. By mounting such an exhibit in a church setting, there is a tendency to court worship of militarized masculinity, the grandeur of the soldiers' sacrifice, and the righteousness of their fight. Even if religion has little or no meaning for viewers, the display of death and destruction in a church serves as a legitimating function for current war efforts. It renders sacrifice, like the tenants of religion itself, as worthy of praise and invites a new type of subjectivity, which is at once religious and militarized, in a state that is at war. Although the stated intention of the exhibit is to underline the sinful and tragic nature of war, some might experience a glorification – even a sanctification – of violence. The conflation of religion and wartime violent death makes such reactions possible. The greater historical and political context is likely to set the tone for the affective response a viewer might have to these objects that evidence death and destruction, icons and crosses. The fighting in the hybrid war was out of sight. Its unrelenting and distant presence enticed civilians to accommodate the death and destruction by not hearing, seeing, or sensing it. The exhibit is a public gesture of co-feeling that tries to entice viewers not to be indifferent to the plight of children in the occupied territories and to feel empathy toward soldiers for the suffering and sacrifice they have endured in defending them.

Might this exhibit, like the services at the cemetery and the commemorative ceremonies for defenders, simply reinforce empathy for 'us' and crystallize sorrow and rage for what was done to 'us' by 'them'? Some of the initiatives to cultivate empathy for the sacrifices and suffering of soldiers court the possibility of foreclosing on empathy for those perceived as Other and serve to deepen distrust and suspicion, magnify and encourage silence, thwart openness, and shut down visionary capabilities of imagination. When empathy for one's own group runs high, like a social media echo chamber, only that suffering is audible, visible, and palpable. This makes

prospects for developing empathy for radical others and reconciliation over past grievances ever more elusive.

### **Concluding thoughts**

It is not our intention to either endorse or condemn the involvement of religious organizations in war. Rather, the rapid embrace of military chaplains as trusted guides in a highly secular society begs explanation. Tributes to soldiers as defenders and the war dead as national martyrs who have sacrificed themselves for the sovereignty of the Ukrainian state are multiplying in the form of commemorations, ceremonies, memorial shrines, urban murals, and rhetorical references. These representations of war, which were prevalent during the years of hybrid war, serve as vehicles to validate particular interpretations of who the enemy was and what proper attitudes toward ‘this aggressor’ should be. When sharp juxtapositions of ‘patriot’ versus ‘enemy’ are presented, they reinforce an unwillingness to empathetically engage with people holding opposing views and experiences. Social positioning, intersubjective relationships, and the particulars of historical moments have the potential to challenge, as well as to reaffirm, the boundedness of these binary categorizations. This is one of the main challenges that will surely confront post-war peacekeeping and efforts at reconciliation once there is no longer armed combat.

Chaplains attempt to frame domains of commonality between themselves and soldiers and among the greater national community. Chaplains as clergy engaged in military affairs enter morally liminal spaces. Not all initiatives are successful. Mismatches block empathetic connections and result in members of the excluded enemy Other group appearing mixed in with the in-group as neighbors, colleagues, and relatives. Other efforts, when successful, rather than unleashing an empathic flow of compassion in the face of senseless human suffering, can be used to manipulate the behavior and thinking of others to engender conformity to the needs of state authorities. Military chaplains, as simultaneous participants in war and in the war recovery effort, empathetically engage on multiple levels. They see the hate, the indifference, and the violence, as well as verbal and non-verbal forms of communication that can potentially yield relief from the woundedness these generate. Developing empathic processes to keep these vistas open are extremely labor intensive and usually take decades before they yield tangible, political results. A cursory comparative glance at other societies that have lived through violence, expulsion, and division, such as Cyprus, Northern Ireland, Israel, North and South Korea, and East and West Germany, confirms this. Given the populist age of hatred and resentment in which we live, the work of cultivating empathy in Ukraine falls to military chaplains. They frame death, suffering, and sacrifice for soldiers and for a broader public of compatriots. In doing so, they begin to define what and who is forgivable, and what and who is not. This is part of greater initiatives to cultivate an empathic impulse on the front – as well as on the home front – to endure war.

## Notes

- 1 See an earlier article by Wanner (2021) on military chaplains during the hybrid war. We are grateful to the editors of this volume for their incisive comments that improved this article, as well as for encouraging us to develop the concept of empathy in conjunction with how it contributes to creating radical otherness.
- 2 Some, such as Russian Foreign Minister Serguei Lavrov, have argued that the Russo-Ukrainian war is a 'total hybrid war' driven by primitive Russophobia. See [www.reuters.com/world/lavrov-says-hard-predict-how-long-wests-total-hybrid-war-russia-will-last-2022-05-14/](http://www.reuters.com/world/lavrov-says-hard-predict-how-long-wests-total-hybrid-war-russia-will-last-2022-05-14/).
- 3 See <https://hromadske.ua/posts/pro-mistectvo-buti-poruch-ateyistiv-v-okopah-tarankovi-probizhki-rozmova-z-kapelanom-zelinskim>. Accessed 12 May 2022.
- 4 A three-part film illustrates this dual nature of serving on the front and the home front. See <https://hromadske.ua/posts/dva-kapelani-chastina-12-l-hromadskedoc>. Accessed 12 May 2022.
- 5 See [www.suvd.com.ua/uk/articles/rozloge-interv-ju-kapelana/show](http://www.suvd.com.ua/uk/articles/rozloge-interv-ju-kapelana/show). Accessed 12 May 2022.
- 6 The formalization of the military chaplaincy as a profession has led to integrating the chaplaincy and religious practices into the workings of a wide spectrum of secular public institutions (Wanner 2022). Church-state initiatives multiplied to include chaplains in the National Guard and the State Border Service as of July 2014, in prisons as of summer 2015, and finally in government transportation services in December 2016, and more recently in health care facilities, such as hospitals and rehabilitation centers.
- 7 See <https://kapelanstvo.info/garnizonnyj-hram/interv-yu-z-ottsem-stepanom-susom-cherez-agresiyu-rosiyi-tserkva-v-ukrayini-otrymala-novyj-dosvid-tsevijskove-kapelanstvo/>. Accessed 12 May 2022. See Wanner (2022) for an expanded discussion of commemorative techniques to enhance empathy for the suffering of others.

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## 8 Capital empathy, and the inequality of the radical other

*Robin Truth Goodman*

As a professor of literature, I am delighted with former U.S. President Barack Obama's celebration of literature as his inspiration for a career in politics or, for that matter, for any career involving public service or active engagement with public life. Obama, here, takes particular pride in recognizing literature's role in teaching empathy.<sup>1</sup> He said,

Are you somebody who worries about people not reading novels anymore? And do you think that has an impact on the culture? When I think about how I understand my role as citizen, setting aside being president, and the most important set of understandings that I bring to that position of citizen, the most important stuff I've learned I think I've learned from novels. It has to do with empathy. It has to do with being comfortable with the notion that the world is complicated and full of grays, but there's still truth there to be found, and that you have to strive for that and work for that. And the notion that it's possible to connect with some[one] else even though they're very different from you.

(U.S. President Barack Obama)

In this, he is in line with a certain "indisputable" philosophical common sense, particularly among liberals. Most famously, Martha Nussbaum, for example, defends, for the sake of humanitarianism, "the literary imagination precisely because it seems to me an essential ingredient of an ethical stance that asks us to concern ourselves with the good of other people whose lives are distant from our own" (1995, p. xvi). Steven Pinker, too, though much more hesitantly, ascribes to fiction as "exercises in perspective-taking that do help to expand people's circle of sympathy" (2011, p. 590), contributing by its teaching of empathy to what he observes counter-intuitively to be a global reduction of violence.<sup>2</sup> Even so, with the book publishing industry in the United States alone netting \$115 billion in 2016, 65% of that in what the industry calls "trade" (or literature), and the market projected to grow<sup>3</sup> (even before the COVID-19 pandemic),<sup>4</sup> one wonders whether Obama's worry about the waning of empathy is really less a fear that literature is



on a downward spiral and more of an acknowledgment that something is broken at the heart of his liberal empire.

Indeed, many of these same liberal philosophers and their followers also claim that the empathy taught to us by literature is protecting us not only from violence, as Pinker argues, but also from the excesses of selfishness, calculation, and acquisitive rationality, or, for Nussbaum, from injustice: “If we do not cultivate the imagination in this way,” she continues, “we lose, I believe, an essential bridge to social justice” (1995, p. xviii). Murray Smith also suggests that the empathy we learn from literature (2011, p. 112) helps us understand others’ perspectives, much in the way that Adam Smith described the production of “fellow-feeling” (2011, p. 103), in order to help us weather the impersonal world of technological accidents, terrorist attacks, uncontrolled crowds, and parental death. Fritz Breithaupt poses literature’s empathy as creating the shared feeling behind “the scene of humanitarian aid,” teaching us that the suffering of the victim is undeserved.<sup>5</sup> In all of these accounts, empathy is created by capitalism in order to save us from capitalism. Behind these assessments of empathy is an assumption that empathy is a kind of remedy from capitalist excess, the “good” repercussions of a capitalism that otherwise would neglect some more fundamental human connection. In such views, this more fundamental human connection – based on equality and sameness, some *thing* that we hold in common because it is essentially *human* – can only be accessed by literature. Murray Smith, for example, lines up with neurologists to call this thing “mirror neurons” (2011, p. 102),<sup>6</sup> which are imaginative simulations, infinitely tradable: projecting other people’s expressions, gestures, and postures into our brains to determine our own responses, without conflict. Belonging to all people as objectified sentiment, these “mirror neurons” circulate emotion through human exchange circuits, from brain to brain, through the eyes and directly into the head. Such a view of empathy has no room for acknowledging power, difference, or the vast and destructive inequality that global capitalism, outside of its liberal ideological defenses, induces.

In a complex economy like our own, empathy is a construction that underlies transactional relations not only with strangers, but also with invisible and unknown abstract market interactors. In other words, in order for me to engage in a transaction, I need to project assumptions and fictions onto the unknown actor at the other end of the transaction that make him into a reflection, equal to me and predictable. That is, I need to assume that the other actor is trustworthy as I am in that he will follow the same agreed-upon but unspoken rules that I follow, based in principles of equivalence conferred through the traded object: he reflects my values. Adam Smith’s *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) sets out this pathway reasonably clearly: in a commercial society, he says, we feel very naturally sympathetic to those in our immediate circle of family and

kinship, less so with our neighbors, but as more distance comes between, the relationship becomes tenuous and abstract, along with the “natural disposition to accommodate and assimilate,” until some other force like God, prudence, happiness, or statesmanship intervenes as a third party in relation to which common feelings and identifications can arise – a common equivalence.

As it amalgamates sentiments between subjects to construct a modern subject, empathy is not just the pathway toward belonging to a community of feeling in a spatially expansive market society; it is also an acknowledgment of a world filled with the unexpected, the unfamiliar, and the different outside of settled symbolic understandings of belonging and association. The growth of technologies of travel and communication underlying modern development demands interactions with strangers and unknowns, and the need to construct cognitive and cultural methods to reduce the distress and alienation of such an encounter in order to transact in a situation that requires equalizing standards of recognition. Empathy continues to entail, as Amanda Anderson has shown, a “prevalent Victorian preoccupation with distinctly modern practices of detachment, a preoccupation characterized by ambivalence and uncertainty about what the significance and consequences of such practices might be” (2001, p. 3).<sup>7</sup> Such modern distancing, says Anderson, affects the development of the sciences and the arts, industrialization, commerce, and the professions, but also the cultivation of moral character. As such, the detachment through which empathy is imagined as necessary is a site of anxiety that was and still is answered by optimistic embellishing and resolutions as well as warnings. This chapter compares empathy as the basis of exchange relations, as seen in British financial writer Sidney Laman Blanchard’s 1851 short story “A Biography of a Bad Shilling,” to a contemporary demise of empathy in Brazilian novelist Clarice Lispector’s 1977 novella *The Hour of the Star*, in order to consider how neoliberal market culture challenges the sympathetic identifications of commonness on which foundational ideals of capital depend. The relationship between empathy and literature can also be quite the reverse of the one that liberal philosophers celebrate.

In opposition to Obama, my analysis shows that literature’s role is also to expose the limits of common feeling in empathy, not only – as the liberal philosophers insist – to make ideological peace with the unequal social relations that neoliberal capitalism orchestrates. Against empathy as “fellow-feeling,” I borrow from Linda Zerilli’s discussions of “radical imagination” to pose critical detachment in the space of the Other. Following Hannah Arendt, Zerilli defines the radical imagination as “trying to see from the perspective of another person” (2005, p. 58) – from difference rather than sameness<sup>8</sup> – which is necessary for democracy. The value of radical imagination is that, rather than seeking after truth or certainty in judgments, it is generative of “a figure of the newly thinkable” (2005, p. 61) or of “the

reflective ability to relate particulars to each other in unexpected . . . ways by creating new forms for organizing our experience” (2005, p. 63).

### “Bad Shilling”

In 1851, Sidney Laman Blanchard described the life of a counterfeit coin in the first-person voice of that same coin. Though clearly forged in a thieves’ den, the coin is mistaken for real as it absorbs the sensibilities of its human interlocutors it meets in its travels. He begins:

My long career upon town – in the course of which I have been bitten, and rung, and subjected to the most humiliating tests – has blunted my sensibilities, while it has taken the sharpness of my edges; and, like the counterfeits of humanity, whose lead may be seen emulating silver at every turn, my only desire is – not to be worthy of passing, but simply – to pass.

(2003, p. 61)<sup>9</sup>

The coin begins life at a forgers’ smithy, where the zinc solicitor’s doorplate that was its mother was melted together with the pewter hotel winecup that was its father, and from there found itself among poets and parliamentarians, gentlemen and crooks, pigeon-breeders and dandies, tradesmen, bankers, police, and smugglers. As its emotions are assembled and moderated through its observations of and identifications within its many human interactions, the coin – an amalgamation of mixed metals – collects and learns to reflect the amalgamated perspectives and experiences of all the humanity it encounters, feeling alongside its human sufferers, trembling when they tremble, actually *becoming human* through observing, mimicking, combining, and thus learning to feel *in common*. Roaming the world as it passes from hand to hand and from pocket to pocket, carried from place to place, dropped and picked up again, the coin learns cordiality and conviviality, and it speaks more standard learned prose than heard in the various workshops, firms, stores, courthouses, and apartments in which it comes temporarily to reside in its circulations. As it observes and learns from many such circumstances, as it comes to be mistaken as “real” money in its absorption of many human emotions, the coin comes to represent a spectator moderated through combining different angles, not tied to any in particular setting, condition, or event, but feeling fellowship by sharing and merging sentiment. Empathy here is a pedagogical process through which the coin can assimilate human sociality.

As a projection of abstract universal equivalence onto a relationship that is transactional, the counterfeit coin is an objectified form of empathy as nineteenth-century Britain understood it. In the nineteenth century, as Victorian scholar Mary Poovey details, political economists used literature to

explain to the public finance's innovations in an economy of credit that created value through contracts, bills, notes, and paper referring to something *not there*. She details (2008, pp. 6–7):

Fiction helped manage the problematic of representation by creating a non-factual form of representation that was nevertheless *not a lie* . . . . [M]oney also constituted a form of writing in relation to which the problematic of representation became visible. . . . As a prototype for the distinction between fact and fiction, the distinction between valid and invalid, money was critical to all the strategies for managing this problematic; but . . . it was a constant reminder of the impermanence and inadequacy of every attempt to fix such distinctions.

As exemplified in “A Biography of a Bad Shilling,” empathy (or sympathy) relied similarly on such techniques of realism that invoked “imaginative writers’ tendency to mine contemporary financial events for characters and plots” (Poovey 2008, p. 9) in order to create a tolerance for such new financial instruments that made real value out of fictional representations of value, conferred through producing familiarity with unfamiliar and fictionalized others.

Blanchard was not the only one to have tapped such literary devices. Blanchard’s contemporary, Karl Marx (among others), was aware of empathy as a model for fictional characters in a fictional marketplace encounter coming to agreement over fictional value. “It is plain,” writes Marx, “that commodities cannot go to market and make exchanges of their own account” (p. 88). Therefore, Marx continues, those entering the marketplace with objects to buy and sell must first establish a relationship based in mutuality. “They must,” he specifies, “therefore, mutually recognise in each other the rights of private proprietors” (p. 88). Now, Marx knew full well that the person who came into the marketplace without anything to sell but their labor power would not be in a position of mutual recognition or equality with the person who had amassed wealth and property through primitive accumulation and now held the keys to industry as its master. Mutual recognition, therefore, or empathy, would need to be constructed and enforced by a legal arrangement, a contract, that is actually “but the reflex of the real economic relation between the two” (p. 88). The transactional reciprocity projects a fiction of formal equality onto the situation by marginalizing or privatizing all parts of the so-called person who would introduce inequality, like race, gender, religion, inheritance, or, most prominently, class. Marx clearly identifies the commodity object as retrofitting, through the imagination, a relation of fictional legal equality between actors facing each other in an exchange. The commodity stands in the middle as a third term, the objectified imagination of shared sentiment, reciprocity, and mutual recognition. In opposition to the liberal philosophers who think that fiction is what stands against the coldness and calculation of capital by tapping into

a relation that is purely and commonly human, Marx conjures up (literary) fictions inside the logic of transaction, cloaking unequal relations under empathy's alibi of sameness.

Marx is following his predecessor, Adam Smith, who also conceived what he called "sympathy"<sup>10</sup> as the fictional glue in social relations for a transactional society whereby the actors were previously unknown to each other. For Smith, "empathy" is a concept borrowed from Stoic philosophy to talk about how society is bound together by a natural harmony in parallel with the physical universe and the laws of nature. Empathy, therefore, is a moral method of social relating over distance, gradually replacing a set of relationships forged in proximity between kin and neighbors (Smith 1984, pp. 82–83). It redraws the stranger under the mantle of a common, shared humanity so that those geographically or culturally removed are abstracted into the generalized parameters of sense and sensitivity that I am accustomed to viewing in myself. The imagination allows us to place ourselves in the situation of the other even if we have no similar immediate experience, to "change places in fancy with the sufferer" by feeling his sentiments, and "without pain or sorrow" (1984, p. 10), as an enactment of sympathy. As Rae Greiner explains, Adam Smith's writings "form a tradition that portrays sympathy as a mental action involving the creation and exchange of imagined feeling, a way of sharing attitudes and modes of thought independent of the need to verify another's feeling" (2012, p. 4). The narrative voice of sympathy – a feeling that is ideational, travels, and set apart from the physical body – works to generalize a shared "character" under the assumption that other people are equal, and so worthy of assuming an abstract "persona" in a contract, due to the equality of their feelings to one's own. "Whatever concerns himself," elaborates Smith, "ought to affect him no more than whatever concerns any other equally important part of this immense system" (1984, p. 140). Separated, detached, dispassionate, and composite, the sympathetic character comes into play only as this third and universalizing term which Smith calls the "impartial spectator."

Though Smith does not explicitly define the "impartial spectator," the multiple references to such a figure throughout *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* draws a picture of a judge that is internal inasmuch as it combines the attitudes of the external crowd, disconnected from self-interested preferences and the extravagant passions of immediate concerns as it adopts the moderation of generalized empathy: "Though it may be true, therefore, that every individual, in his own breast, naturally prefers himself to all mankind," Smith embellishes,

yet he . . . feels that in this preference they [mankind] can never go along with him, and that how natural soever it may be to him, it must always appear excessive and extravagant to them. When he views himself in the light in which he is conscious that others will view him, he sees that to them he is but one of the multitude. . . . If he would act so as that the

impartial spectator may enter into the principles of his conduct, . . . he must, upon this, as upon all other occasions, humble the arrogance of his self-love, and bring it down to something which other men can go along with.

(1984, p. 83)

Like Blanchard's coin, the "impartial spectator" – disentangled from self-love, factions, fanaticisms, and the "rage of contesting parties" and behaving "with fortitude and firmness" (Smith 2018, p. 156) – collects and combines the various points of view and affective impressions of the "mankind" it encounters. We might call this crowd "the marketplace." This moral shared sentiment, in Smith's 1776 classic study of market economies in liberalism *The Wealth of Nations*, becomes the trope that Adam Smith is best known for: the invisible hand. Like the "impartial spectator," the invisible hand is the metaphor for the economic balance achieved in the myriad market transactions, the shared sentiment of moderation, devoid of passions and particularities, that provides a universal good because every economic actor participates in it.<sup>11</sup>

The realism of the British nineteenth-century realist novel inherits the "impartial spectator" that combines many character perspectives in a composite of moral moderation. As Deidre Shauna Lynch has shown, the nineteenth-century realist narrative passes into various scenes of village or urban life and visits multiple relationships, journeys, and events on the way toward a moralizing, universalizing balance achieved most often through maturation and marriage. Lynch observes that the impartiality of the nineteenth-century novelistic vision evolves out of late eighteenth-century/early nineteenth-century narratives of talking money, where the coin takes on the poised sensibility of the eighteenth-century "gentleman" who is sympathetic to all experience that he encounters:

The coin's or banknote's adventures closely resemble those of the gentleman who knows what it is to enter into sociable exchanges with all and sundry. (Conversely, it is the possession of these coins and banknotes that expedites the gentleman's exemplary mobility.) Money is, after all, an appropriate vehicle for a narrative form organized to enable readers to collect the characters of experience by collecting characters in the other sense of the term.

(1998, p. 96)

Reversing the causality assumed by liberal philosophers like Martha Nussbaum, Steven Pinker, or, indeed, Barack Obama, Lynch understands the need for a fiction of shared sentiment – equality – in a transactional society based on inequality to be what compels the rise of the novel. She reads sympathetic literature as building the sympathetic character to cement social bonding between strangers and across distances. Requiring intercourse with the unfamiliar, the expansion of money and markets compels the creation of



an imaginative correspondence that moderates the differences between subjects in exchange, promoting the semblance of a composite, a shared human sentiment that becomes the foundation of the modern novel.

### **The Hour of the Star**

A break from realism starting from the early twentieth century and intensifying throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first centuries can be said to be coincident with a skepticism about this composite character that empathy both promised and assumed. Brazilian novelist Clarice Lispector's 1977 novel *The Hour of the Star*, for example, tests empathy, and empathy fails. The novel tells of a male artist/novelist who, in the Pygmalion tradition,<sup>12</sup> reproduces the female protagonist in his own image. Then, he cannot muster up any "fellow-feeling" for her because the female protagonist, Macabéa – an orphan and a migrant from the northeast into the city, without memory of origins or parentage – reaches a degree of pathos unmanageable within traditional categories of equality, reciprocity, and recognition expected in exchange. "I too," he announces, "have no pity for my main character, the northeast girl: it's a story I want to be cold" (Lispector 2011, p. 5). *The Hour of the Star* is a story about attempts to copy – to reproduce likeness and like sentiment in a culture of exchange – that all fail like the social glue of "fellow-feeling" in empathy.

*The Hour of the Star* tells of a young urban migrant woman trying to fit into an already constituted, female-reliant service sector which, like the narrator, is unsympathetic toward her. Rodrigo, the narrator, explains:

Like the northeastern girl, there are thousands of girls scattered throughout the tenement slums, vacancies in beds in a room, behind the shop counters working to the point of exhaustion. They don't even realize how easily substitutable they are and that they could just as soon drop off the face of the earth.

(Lispector 2011, p. 6)

Before the sheer magnitude of poverty, the narrator's empathy here – or universal exchangeability – fails as a method of identification through abstract representations of sameness and "fellow-feeling." Macabéa lives, works (but badly), tries not to throw up, listens to the radio, nearly falls in love but does not, visits a doctor who does not help her, and then, exiting from an appointment with a fortune-teller, gets crushed by a yellow Mercedes-Benz in a hit and run, and bleeds out on the sidewalk. As she lies dying on the sidewalk,

Some people sprouted in the alleyway out of nowhere and gathered around Macabéa without doing anything just as people had always done nothing for her.

(Lispector 2011, pp. 71–72)

Opposite to the counterfeit coin's gregariousness, Macabéa is disconnected, uprooted, depraved, and, even at the moment of her death, outside sociality. The spectators' complete detachment proves her unrecognizable inside a system of representation based in exchange, reciprocity, and empathy.

Even as the narrator creates the protagonist in his own image, attempting empathy with his creation, the empathetic impulse fails as it comes into contact with her difference, expressed through need – “the feeling of perdition on the face of a northeast girl” (Lispector 2011, p. 4). Like Adam Smith's impartial spectator, Rodrigo attempts finding commonality with Macabéa and only ends up marginalizing her as a worker, as a woman, and as regionally and ethnically other. Rodrigo imagines the object he creates, he thinks, through sympathy. “[T]his narrative will deal with something delicate,” the narrator, Rodrigo S. M., dispassionately begins, “the creation of a whole person who surely is alive as I am” (Lispector 2011, p. 11). “I see the northeastern girl looking in the mirror,” he boasts, “and . . . in the mirror appears my weary and shaven face” (Lispector 2011, p. 14). As a creator, Rodrigo admits, he participates in the global production line, sponsored by

the most popular soft drink in the world even though it's not paying me a cent, a soft drink distributed in every country. Moreover, it's the same soft drink that sponsored the last earthquake in Guatemala. Even though it tastes like nail polish, Aristolino soap and chewed plastic.

(Lispector 2011, p. 15)

The shared attitudes and multiple viewpoints distributed through the commercial products do not create a sharing of feeling but rather, on the contrary, expose disassociation and inequality.

While Rodrigo imagines Macabéa's character as reflecting his own image, Macabéa is unassimilable. Especially in response to the demands of work, Macabéa fails in her job as a typist, proving the failure of simulating equality as she copies the text with errors: “she made too many typing mistakes, besides invariably dirtying the pages” (Lispector 2011, 16). Like the counterfeit coin, Macabéa's job is simply to copy the text of others, but she “wrote so badly,” Rodrigo condescends, “she only had three years of school” (Lispector 2011, p. 7). Macabéa's errors inspire Rodrigo's doubts about language as a referential system of universal equivalence where words and symbols are reflections that copy objects and can be exchanged with them like the shilling. Like the money system, the text is “inadequate” – as Macabéa confirms – to describing, controlling, and holding in place the social relations necessary for its own sense-making and reproduction. Sometimes,” Rodrigo says, “I manage to get a word out of her but it slips through my fingers” (Lispector 2011, p. 21). Or, “I have a fidgety character on my hands and who escapes me at every turn expecting me to retrieve her” (Lispector 2011, p. 13). Macabéa's needs create crisis.

Not only the text, but Macabéa herself cannot be imagined through the universal equivalent: when she looks into the mirror, the “tarnished mirror didn’t reflect any image” (Lispector 2011, p. 17). She loves ads, but even as a consumer, Macabéa cannot follow the basic rules proscribed to her by the commercialism in which she longs to identify her own desires: she is the mistake in her own text. When the doctor prescribes pasta and alcohol, she does not know what pasta and alcohol are, and when he prescribes tonic, she forgets to buy it. Clock Radio interrupts the regularity of its rhythms by running short ads that Macabéa mimics, always getting them wrong. “‘Repent in Christ and He will give you happiness.’ So she repented. Since she wasn’t quite sure for what, she repented entirely” (Lispector 2011, p. 29). Or, “I just love hearing the drops of the minutes of time like this: tic-tac-tic-tac-tic-tac. Clock Radio says that it gives the correct time, culture and ads. What does culture mean? . . . What does ‘per capita income’ mean?” (Lispector 2011, 41). Macabéa is so seduced by the call to identify with the advertisements on Clock Radio that she tries to reinvent herself for the object the ad-language promises to become, but fails: “There was an ad,” she notes, in her collection of ads pasted into her album,

the most precious of all, that showed in full color the open pot of cream for the skin of women who simply were not her. Blinking furiously (a fatal tic she had recently acquired), she lay there imagining with delight: the cream was so appetizing that if she had the money to buy it she wouldn’t be a fool. To hell with her skin, she’d eat it, that’s right, in large spoonfuls straight from the jar.

(Lispector 2011, p. 30)

Macabéa has no use for the cream, as the dryness of her skin is so extreme as to elude remedy. She transforms the popular commodity from a useless commercial set of promises, healing, and narrative ideals to a fulfillment of a basic need, but a need that the product does not resolve or even recognize.<sup>13</sup>

So, what broke? Whereas “The Biography of a Bad Shilling” tells a story about an underclass actor who mixes into industrialist circles, workhouses, legal establishments, and places of trade and there assimilates into working-class and then middle-class social life in an upwardly mobile trajectory, by the end of the twentieth century, such assimilation is unbalanced and empathy itself is disrupted.<sup>14</sup> The northeastern girl fails to enter into the urban workforce with its exchangeable technological rhythms and expanding capitalization. Without friends or family, Macabéa is undernourished, unhygienic, unloved, ugly, “mute” (Lispector 2011, p. 21), lackluster, asexual, fatigued, “gratuitous” (Lispector 2011, p. 24), alone, covered in skin defects and filth, unable to love or be loved, and unable to reproduce. Phrases like “quivering thinness” (Lispector 2011, p. 11) and “calcium deficiency” (Lispector 2011, p. 20) litter the narrator’s descriptions of her; she

is compared to a “weed” (Lispector 2011, p. 20) with a “drooping head” (Lispector 2011, p. 21) or “the form of grass in the sewer” (Lispector 2011, p. 71) and has trouble holding down her own food. Like the counterfeit coin setting out from the forger’s, she is a “vague existence” (Lispector 2011, p. 9), “sparse” (Lispector 2011, p. 15), “an emptiness of soul” (Lispector 2011, p. 6), “the flavorlessness of the word” (Lispector 2011, p. 11), the “invisible in the mud itself” (Lispector 2011, p. 11), “almost erased” (Lispector 2011, p. 38). Unlike the counterfeit coin, however, her character does not develop through assimilating the perspectives of others; instead, “the ‘protagonist’ is so infinitely small,” as Hélène Cixous summarizes, “that she is not even noticeable” (1990, p. 149). “[T]his story is almost nothing” (Lispector 2011, p. 16), the narrator admits. “[D]on’t you have a face?” (Lispector 2011, p. 56) asks her co-worker Glória; “[c]ould her physical existence have vanished?” (Lispector 2011, p. 17) Cixous identifies Macabéa as in excess to the economy: “I can situate myself at the paradoxical limits. . . of all markets” (1990, p. 156), she explains. Macabéa’s invisible existence makes visible the necessary inequality embedded inside these economic relations of empathy, an inequality defined by its non-accommodation within existing representations of abstract equivalence. Without a common sensibility with others, Macabéa receives no human care or connection. Macabéa is nothing and, as nothing, she is unrelatable and radically Other. As such, she is unbearable.

Lispector is most often read as focused on spirit, subjectivity, and thought movements rather than on physical action, political conflict, objectivity, or critique. Reading this alienation as predominantly a reflection on art or existential crises, critics have mostly noticed how, in place of a plot, *The Hour of the Star* chronicles each slight shifting of thought and mental imagery as an event of some magnitude. Her critics mostly agree that Lispector narrates through abstraction and interiority. Assis Brasil, for example, remarks that she is “[t]racing a subjective world, in which interior action is more important than the simple external episode” (26; my translation). As Cynthia Sloan (2001, p. 100) has lamented, “Throughout her career, Lispector’s work was criticized for being too ephemeral and unconcerned with contemporary social and political problems,” and her biographer and translator Benjamin Moser also concludes that Lispector’s stylistic innovations and introspectiveness lay to waste an “offensive” and obstructive politics. He explains quite offensively, “As her early writing suggests, and the whole of her life would prove, her interests were spiritual rather than material. Whatever material or ideological strains her early writing betrays – the rather strident feminism, for example – would soon disappear” (Moser 2009, p. 105). Her novels and stories generally slow the movement of time down to the point where, for example, a hesitation in walking reaches a similar intensity of turmoil and change as an act of war. *The Hour of the Star* obsessively plots the subjective moments that move between objective events, turning story-time and history inside-out. The interpretive history of *The Hour of*

*the Star* does not, therefore, interrogate how the extreme isolation of the subject is an effect of the extreme alienation induced by a political dispossession and economic disposability, an irreconcilability whose politics are left submerged within the frame as a dissonance. In the words of Theodor Adorno,

The *monologue intérieur*, the worldlessness of modern art . . . is both the truth and the appearance of a free-floating subjectivity – it is truth, because in the universal state of the world, alienation rules over men, turning them into mere shadows of themselves.

(1977, p. 160)

The “solitary consciousness” of the modernist subject in art and literature, writes Adorno, “potentially destroys and transcends itself by revealing itself in works of art as the hidden truth common to all men” (1977, p. 166). In other words, as with Adam Smith, the extreme focus on a detached subjectivity hides the social inequality that such subjective aloneness makes evident.

According to Antonio Negri (1991), the late 1970s, when Lispector wrote *The Hour of the Star*, spearheads a crisis in the social equivalence that money introduces. We might call this crisis neoliberalism, when the welfare investments that the state had been making to balance out interactions in labor markets are diminished under pressure from increasing privatization and financialization. To explain this occurrence, Negri criticizes Marx for, in *Capital*, not taking seriously enough the contradictions embedded in the money form and for putting the market transaction – based in assumed equivalencies – ahead of an engagement with money which is premised on inequality.

For Negri, money is what exposes the ironies and mystifications of the encounter between markets and workers. He explains that:

the analysis of money, is precisely what allows us to analyse the form of value. From this point of view, . . . the reality of mystification appears here in a more tangible form than in other passages of Marx where the commodity form is the central protagonist.

(1991, p. 10)

As is much noted, Marx saw value as the mystification of the surplus that labor added to the object in the process of exchanging his time for production under an unequal social arrangement where the worker has nothing else to sell. The mystification of value is therefore, Negri says, the result of a “literary fiction” (1991, p. 24) based in commodity exchange that hides the connection between valuation and exploitation embedded in money. For Negri, the waged work market transaction – because it assumes equality and sympathetic identification but is based on inequality – paradoxically

can only expand its equalities by expanding inequality. This inequality in the wage relation is capital's internal antagonism:

if money is an equivalent, if it has the nature of an equivalent, it is above all *the equivalence of social inequality*. Crisis, then, does not come from the imperfection of circulation in a regime of equivalence, and it cannot be corrected by a reform of circulation in a regime of equivalence. Crisis derives from the inequality of the relations of production.

(1991, p. 26).<sup>15</sup>

Unlike the counterfeit coin, Macabéa cannot be compared or equated; with her skin ailments, her possible pulmonary tuberculosis, her neuroses, and her “cavity-ridden body” (Lispector 2011, p. 52), she cannot be imagined as similar; she cannot change places; her pain is unsharable. Though liberal and Marxist theorists alike, says Negri, have understood imbalances in productive processes to smooth out in the circulation phase, the dominance of money – as the abstract empty form granting equalizing value in universal exchange – allows for the constant reintroduction of inequality as antagonism, and the imagined equality of exchange on which empathy is based is dismantled with its system of representation in abstract equivalence. In neoliberalism, what this crisis presages is that the economy no longer has a need to invite in the worker through abstract equivalence, and money detaches from teaching workers to imagine their own place of exchangeability within the market system.

Many critics have noticed a transformation in the mid-1970s whereby capital was turning away from labor, whether in cuts to the welfare state, cuts in wages, or disinvestments in poorer countries and communities, with more of the surplus redirected toward corporate and financial managers, and workers making up the difference through borrowing. There are many examples of this, but one is Florida's Senate Bill 50 in 2021, signed into law by Gov. Ron DeSantis on 19 April as an internet tax bill was passed in a state without income taxes with the proceeds intended to cut corporate unemployment insurance obligations, reducing assistance to the unemployed in the middle of a pandemic. As David Harvey has explained it, “Deregulation, privatization, and withdrawal of the state from many areas of social provision have been all too common” (2005, p. 3). Likewise, money value, for Negri, is the form taken by the struggle between the worker's needs and reproduction or “social provision” on the one hand, and, on the other, the capitalist's desire to reduce its obligations toward tending to worker needs in order to increase surplus. Macabéa stands as a disassociation between expanding production and worker assimilation or identification within that expansion, and as such, she stands in as pure need. Macabéa does not enter the marketplace as a target of empathy or imagined equivalence. Even as, Rodrigo admits, “I know there are girls who sell their bodies, their only real possession, in exchange for a good dinner instead of a sandwich” (Lispector



2011, p. 5), Macabéa – unlike the worker entering the marketplace with nothing to sell but his labor power – “scarcely,” announces her creator, “has a body to sell” (Lispector 2011, p. 5). The very idea that the commodity can inspire love through imaginative identification with other people’s suffering has not only been set aside but also has remade literature’s project. Lispector is, instead, situating the literary imagination as the limit of empathy where, as in Negri’s prognostication, critique flourishes.

## Conclusion

There is no doubt that novels engage empathetic identifications, as Obama suggested. The novel depicts a set of subjective concerns and asks the reader to imagine how that set of subjective concerns would solve a set of problems or adapt to a set of social conditions. Novels ask the reader to *imagine* what it would mean to be someone else, someone unfamiliar, in the situation that may be distant, abstract, elsewhere, or never before encountered. As philosophically framed, the practice requires detachment, but also an abstract attachment to the viewpoint of another, creating the circumstances for imagined generalized reciprocity and “fellow-feeling.”

That empathetic role may be less essential to the novel now, given the modernist techniques used in a novel like *Hour of the Star* to achieve detachment and dis-identification, techniques which also have found a home in many novels recognized as “postcolonial.” The industrial capitalism of Marx’s time required an assumption of equality to bridge differences and distance with an eye to universal exchange, so nineteenth-century literature might engage with questions raised in relation to assimilation across differences. Blanchard’s “A Biography of a Bad Shilling” shows that imagining universal exchange is what money elicits, as everything can be equalized to money. In the figure of Lispector’s Macabéa, though, she does not equate to money. Money no longer needs to find an equivalence in the worker. Unlike the bad shilling, Macabéa does not find an equivalence in any form of equating or representation engrained through money’s culture. Capital’s disinvestments from production and from workers (neoliberalism) leads to a disassociation, a distraction, a distance, a detachment, and a disinvestment from former equivalencies – so the construction of sameness required for industrial capitalism to work – in the contract and in the market – is broken down, diminishing empathy as a strategy of supporting systemic adhesion.

The disarticulation of empathy in literature is prevalent. One can look, for example, at the controversy surrounding the publication by Macmillan of *American Dirt* by Jeanine Cummins. Cummins is a non-Mexican writer who wrote this novel about the experience of Mexican migrants, a novel which some say “completely erases the voices of Central Americans” (Juan González). The novel’s critics protested the insufficient representation of minority writers in the publishing industry, and the publisher responded by canceling the writer’s U.S. book tour and then promising

to investigate and end discriminatory practices in the industry. I do not here judge the novel's literary quality or the story's validity or accuracy. Rather, I am remarking that the imagination that "fiction" once promised (the word "novel" appears on the cover) is now thought of as dangerous property theft rather than "fellow-feeling." In the wake of the controversy surrounding "Forrest Carter's" 1976 feel-good piece of Native American/environmentalist schlock, *The Education of Little Tree* – after it was discovered that the author was really a member of the Ku Klux Klan and a speech writer for George Wallace, Henry Louise Gates Jr. wrote this in *The New York Times*:

The lesson of the literary blindfold test is not that our social identities don't matter. They do matter. And our histories, individual and collective, do affect what we wish to write and what we are able to write. But that relation is never one of fixed determinism. No human culture is inaccessible to someone who makes the effort to understand, to learn, to inhabit another world.

(1991)

Yet, for the critics of *American Dirt*, reading does not engage with the imagination of mixing viewpoints and understanding the radical Other, but rather underscores the unsharable "ownership" of types of experience. The incident, on the one hand, acknowledges the demand for expansion of the terms of "inclusion" in bestseller mass markets but also, at the same time, a change in the expectations of the novel that Obama wistfully longs for, whereby the reader identifies with universal equivalents like money by feeling in terms equatable to the imagined feelings of others. Empathy no longer fills the role, in which Obama publicly takes pride, of inciting the mixing of perspectives in an "impartial spectator" that functions like money by constructing an imagination of equality over the basic antagonisms integral to social relations in a class-divided market society.<sup>16</sup>

Nevertheless, this does not mean, as Obama predicts, that the novel disappears but rather that the novel answers to other historical needs that brush against empathy. This turn from empathy is also responding to a change in today's market societies which find no use for promoting ideologies of equalities. Investments in the lives of workers are increasingly discussed as nothing but an obstacle to economic growth, and the worker is increasingly discussed in terms of resilience, left, like Macabéa, responsible for herself and precariously alone. A phase like this might dovetail with what Giovanni Arrighi understands as a period of financial expansion where "an increasing mass of money capital 'sets itself free' from its commodity form, and accumulation proceeds through financial deals" (Arrighi 1994, p. 6), tending to withdraw from commerce, commodities, and "human and natural resources" (Arrighi 1994, p. 7). In these periods, capital prefers "liquidity," notes Arrighi, "and an unusually large share

of their cash flow tends to remain in liquid form” (Arrighi 1994, p. 5), detached, “free,” and flexible. What Lispector seems to be keying into, however, is a disinvestment from “human and natural resources” (Arrighi 1994, p. 7) that may not be cyclical but rather systemic. With, for example, the technologization of productive processes, automation, labor obsolescence, global migration (often incited by environmental or human-made catastrophe), and increasing global economic polarization, neoliberalism is ushering in a phase in which capital has no interest in preparing the worker for the next day of work or preparing the next generation of workers, and therefore has turned away from reproducing the workforce by contributing to education, health care, transportation, housing, environmental protection, or investing in maintaining the conditions of life.<sup>17</sup> Instead, literary and critical trends are appealing to already constituted, recognizable, empiricized, decontextualized, and dehistoricized identity groups whereby readers find characters and situations that “look like me,” affirming the inevitable reality of the subject and the world as it already is. Accounting for literature’s rebuff of empathetic engagement with the other, this disassociation between literature and empathy disrupts empathy’s liberal contract and its concern with creating points of abstract identification whereby workers and citizens can see themselves as inside a system of universal exchange. Though *The Hour of the Star* can in no way be read as a revolutionary text, it proves literature – in contrast to Obama’s assessment – to be persevering in its critical tendency of exposing and expanding the contradictions in the existing world.

## Notes

- 1 One might wonder what empathy might imply for a politician who presided over targeted assassinations, the most deportations of immigrants of any sitting U.S. president (at the time), and increased economic polarization both nationally and globally.
- 2 In this volume, Margrethe Bruun Vaage discusses fiction film as a mechanism for creating identifications with certain character types who are engaging in actions we may think of as immoral if we thought about them in actual life. I am approaching the relationship between literary fiction and empathy a bit differently: I discuss here how literary narratives have the pedagogical function of teaching us what empathy is.
- 3 Grand View Research, *Books Market Size Analysis Report by Product (Trade, Other), by Region (North America, Europe, Asia Pacific, Latin America, and Middle East and Africa) And Segment Forecasts, 2018–2025*, January 2018. See: [www.grandviewresearch.com/industry-analysis/books-market](http://www.grandviewresearch.com/industry-analysis/books-market). Accessed: 26 January 2020.
- 4 UK book sales went up 16% (or more than \$970 million) in 2020, even with brick-and-mortar book stores closed, and 9.7% in the United States, with sales continuing to rise in 2021 at 19.1%, or \$1.3 billion in profits (Kate Whiting, Book sales are up: this is what we’ve been reading during the pandemic. *World Economic Forum*, 26 May 2021. [www.weforum.org/agenda/2021/05/covid-19-book-sales-reading/](http://www.weforum.org/agenda/2021/05/covid-19-book-sales-reading/). Accessed: 24 April 2022).

- 5 For example, “Change and development are also a key part of the narrative in literature and film, drawing the reader or viewer in to find out whether conditions will improve” (2019, p. 133). For Breithaupt, there are a number of literary elements that draw out the conditions of empathy, including relating to victims and suffering and reacting negatively to disproportionate punishment, as well as being able to imagine interventions that would change a negative situation.
- 6 One might think of this in relation to Jacques Lacan’s “Mirror Stage,” whereby the mirror image is the basis of the subject’s projection into language, or the infinitely tradable symbolic. As for Lacan, for Smith, mirror neurons are what allow the extension of mind into the world. In the end, Smith, though, admits, “The mirror system does not constitute a complete neural foundation from the platform for imaginative simulation as it has been defined and debated by philosophers” (2011, p. 102). Instead, he poses the imagination of intersubjective relationships as defined by Adam Smith.
- 7 Anderson defines “modern detachment” thus (p. 4):

An ideal of critical distance, itself deriving from the project of Enlightenment, lies behind many Victorian aesthetic and intellectual projects, including the emergent human sciences and allied projects of social reform; various ideals of cosmopolitanism and disinterestedness; literary forms such as omniscient realism and dramatic monologue; and the prevalent project of *Bildung*, or the self-reflexive cultivation of character which animated much of Victorian ethics and aesthetics . . . . Yet at the same time many Victorians were wary of certain distancing effects of modernity, including the overvaluing and misapplication of scientific method as well as the forms of alienation and rootlessness that accompanied modern disenchantment, industrialism, and the globalization of commerce.

In short, “modern detachment” is a term that describes “what it means to cultivate a distanced relation toward one’s self, one’s community, or those objects one chooses to study or represent” (p. 4).

- 8 Indeed, Carolyn Pedwell (in this volume) writes that the prevalent assumption that empathy entails “fellow-feeling” and therefore an emotional equivalence with the other translates into an imperialist reconstruction of the other that could, potentially, amount to violence, appropriation, and/or silencing.
- 9 First published in *Household Words* 2 (January 1851): 420–426.
- 10 Recent critics recognize that what Smith meant by “sympathy” is what “empathy” is for us. Steven Pinker notes that “[t]he meteoric rise of *empathy* coincided with its taking on a new meaning, one that is closer to ‘sympathy’ or ‘compassion’” (p. 574). Murray Smith likewise acknowledges that “Adam Smith used ‘sympathy’ to refer to a phenomenon that we would call empathy” (p. 103).
- 11 There has been much scholarship about the relationship between *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* and *The Wealth of Nations*. In the introduction to the volume of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* cited, the editors D. D. Raphael and A. L. Macfie, after reviewing the available research, conclude (p. 23),

Smith himself provides the best evidence against any idea that there is a conflict between his two works. In the Advertisement to edition 6 of [*The Theory of Moral Sentiments*] he refers to the final paragraph of the book, which promises another one on law and government, and says that he has ‘partly executed this promise’ in [*Wealth of Nations*]. Clearly therefore he regards [*Wealth of Nations*] as continuing the sequence of thought set out in [*The Theory of Moral Sentiments*]. Moreover, . . . any reader can see that the new material . . . is simply a development of Smith’s earlier position and at the same time reflects some of the interests in [*Wealth of Nations*].

- 12 Lispector's final, uncompleted novel, *A Breath of Life* (published posthumously two years after *The Hour*), also borrows from Pygmalion: "I am a man who chose the great silence. Creating a being who stands in opposition to me is within the silence" (1978, p. 18). This Pygmalionesque combining of divine creation and artistic invention inspired the Spanish film director Pedro Almodóvar to write an appreciative introduction to the novel in the wake of the popular reception of his 2011 film *The Skin I Live In* (*La piel que habito*). The film is a revenge castration narrative that creates a person by recreating her gender as crisis – making a woman out of a man as retributive punishment.
- 13 For a longer and fuller treatment of *The Hour of the Star*, see my "The woman, the worker, the warrior, and the writer: the military nation and the making of female neoliberal subjectivity." In *Gender for the Warfare State: Literature of Women in Combat* (New York and London: Routledge, 2017), pp. 140–164.
- 14 *The Hour of the Star*, argues Cynthia Sloan, fails in its empathic politics through "Rodrigo's frustrated attempts to forget himself and to identify with the 'other'" (2001, p. 99; my translation).
- 15 Negri's emphasis.
- 16 Even *The New York Times* laments this loss. In a 24 April 2022 editorial, Pamela Paul asks:

Did Dana Schultz, a white artist, have the right to pain Emmett Till? Was it fair that a white historian, David Blight, won a Pulitzer for his biography of Frederick Douglass? Should Steven Spielberg and Tony Kushner be the ones to update "West Side Story," a musical conceived by four Jewish men but fundamentally about Puerto Rican lives?

In questioning the value and weightiness of "lived experience" as a harbinger of truth, Paul reasons, "Surely human beings are capable of empathizing with those whose ethnicity of country of origin differ from their own. Surely storytellers have the ability to faithfully imagine the experiences of 'the other.'" For Paul, the outsider's view offers alternative perspectives. "People can successfully project themselves into the lives of others," she concludes. "That is what art is meant to do – cross boundaries, engender empathy with other people, bridge differences between author and reader, one human and another."

- 17 The administration of U.S. President Joseph Biden seemed to be taking a different direction, but failed. With pandemic relief and infrastructure spending, Biden gestured towards a return to classical liberalism in a renewal of New Deal-like policies. However, especially with the opposition party taking an increasingly hard line on authoritarianism, voter suppression, and tax relief for corporations, for example, and Sen. Joe Manchin of West Virginia refusing to sign on to spending for protecting the environment and workers, a fundamental change away from neoliberalism failed to materialize, continuing the trends of indifference to the needs of workers and citizens, a reduction in the politics of the public sphere we call democracy, and a restoration of public spending in the form of "military humanism" with massive arms transfers to Ukraine.

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## 9 Situating empathy

### Holocaust education for the Middle East/Muslim minority in Germany<sup>1</sup>

*Esra Özyürek*

How Muslim-minority Germans, specifically Turkish- and Arab-Germans, do not engage with the Holocaust in the right way became a concern for Holocaust educators in the 1990s (Fava 2015) and recently became a matter of public political discussion. In June 2015, Kurt Steiner, an MP from the Christian Social Union in Bavaria, declared that students who come from Muslim, refugee, and asylum-seeking families do not need to visit concentration camps as part of their education. Mr. Steiner explained, “Muslims and refugees do not have any connection to the history of German National Socialism. And this should remain so.” He further explained, “One should be careful with such students because they face cognitive and emotional challenges” (Smale 2015). Left-wing politicians responded swiftly to his statement. Georg Rosenthal of the Social Democrat Party responded that visiting the scenes of Nazi crimes is “especially important for young immigrants so that they can understand why they need to assume responsibility for German history” (Smale 2015).

Although there is no consensus about what exactly is “wrong” about the way Muslim-minority Germans and Europeans engage with the Holocaust, recently there has been widely shared public discomfort with it (Allouche-Benayoun and Jikeli 2013). Newspapers run stories about how Muslim students refuse to attend concentration camp tours and do not engage with the material on National Socialism in history classes (Kouparanis 2012; Schmidl 2003). Rosenthal’s statement reveals that the core of the perceived problem is an emotional (as well as cognitive) challenge seen as specific to the Muslim minority, which prevents them from having empathy towards Jewish victims of the Holocaust. The white Christian background majority often assumes that Muslims see Jews as radical others. Educators often complain to me and to others about the unfitting emotions Muslim minority members express in relation to the Holocaust. Most common complaints include fear that something like the Holocaust may happen to them as well, jealousy of the status of Jewish victims, and pride in their national background.

1 An earlier version of this article appeared as *Anthropological Theory as Rethinking Empathy: Emotions Triggered by the Holocaust among the Muslim-minority in Germany*. 18(4): 456–477.

Some German experts utilize outmoded national character analysis to explain the root of the problem with an essentialized approach towards Turkish and Arab cultures (Özyürek 2016). They suggest that Arabs have a tendency towards self-victimization and Turks feel inherently proud, characteristics leading each group to an inability to empathize with Jewish victims (Müller 2007). Others think that, because the German education system does not recognize their identities, Turkish- and Arab-background immigrants focus on themselves instead of on the victims of the Holocaust (Gryglweski 2010). While experts try to explain what is wrong with how Muslims relate to the Holocaust and why this is the case, governmental and non-governmental organizations in Germany, France, the Netherlands, Austria, and Switzerland fund dozens of extra-curricular programs designed specifically to teach the Muslim minority about National Socialism and encourage them to empathize with Jewish victims.<sup>1</sup> In such programs, Muslim minorities are taught that “help, survival, civil courage, and resistance to authoritarian structures” as part of their integration into German society as democratic citizens (Doughan 2013). In orientation programs organized for (Muslim as well as non-Muslim) migrants, participants are schooled “to remember, mourn, and even feel shame for, events that predated their arrival in Germany by decades” (Brown 2014, p. 439).

Despite the special programs devoted to non-German citizens and residents, especially to those of Turkish, Arab and other Muslim backgrounds, such people continue to be accused of relating to the Holocaust memory incorrectly, and of not shouldering responsibility for this massive crime. What triggers the strong need to develop Holocaust education programs specifically for the racialized minorities who are increasingly seen in opposition to European identity? What does the popular conviction that regular Holocaust education cannot generate proper empathy when translated across ethnic and religious boundaries reveal about the relation of Holocaust memory education to national identification in Germany? Focusing on instances when the reactions of Muslim-minority Germans towards the Holocaust were judged to be unempathetic or morally wrong, this chapter explores how Holocaust education and contemporary understandings of empathy in teaching about the worst manifestation of racism in history can also at times exclude minorities from the German/European moral makeup and the fold of national belonging.

Returning to 20th-century discussions of empathy in the German language, especially as developed by Edmund Husserl, reveals a much more complex and nuanced experience of intersubjective connection. On this basis, I examine Holocaust education in Germany and the conceptualization of empathy that constitutes it. My critique turns the inquiry around so that rather than placing the emotional reactions of Muslim-minority Germans towards the Holocaust on trial for their inadequacies, I can query assumptions about German national belonging in particular, and more generally any national belonging that offers a single historical perspective as a

moral standard. Building on Husserl's concept of the intersubjective nature of empathy, we see that the previous experiences and positionality of the empathizer – not their moral qualities – shape the nature of the empathetic process.

### From *Einfluehlung* to empathy and back

Arguably, empathy has become the most celebrated political emotion of the 21st century. Contemporary public figures from former US President Barack Obama (2006) to Facebook founder Marc Zuckerberg<sup>2</sup> talk about empathy as the root of responsible citizenship. Dozens of best-selling books promise to improve the capacity for empathy so that we can have a more civil and equal society, develop better relationships, and succeed in business. Recent scholarship shows how empathy translates differently as it travels to different contexts and activates unexpected solidarities and potentialities (Pedwell 2014).

Introduced and developed in the German language, empathy has not always been seen as a desirable quality necessary for the development of moral, social, or political life. The first German philosopher who engaged with the concept *Einfluehlung* was the 18th-century Romantic Johann Gottfried Herder, who talked about the connection between feeling and knowing (Edwards 2013). Robert Vischer popularized the term in 1873 in his dissertation in the field of aesthetics and advanced the notion that the term literally means “feeling into” an art object (Vischer 1994: pp. 89–123). Theodor Lipps (1903) introduced the concept to the field of psychology as the basic capacity to understand others as minded creatures. The word “empathy” appeared in the English language for the first time in 1909, when Cornell University psychologist Edward Titchner translated the German word into English, defining it as Lipps had used it. In the United States, Franz Boas relied on the concept *Einfluehlung* as developed by Herder to describe the basis of the anthropological method of ethnography (Edwards 2013; Bunzl 2004). Only after World War II did empathy come to be understood as a measurable attribute in an individual or group (Dymond 1949; Norman and Leiding 1956) – one that came to be seen as lacking among many non-Jewish Germans during and shortly after the Third Reich (Parkinson 2015).

In the last decade, anthropologists have critically explored the role of positive emotions such as sympathy and compassion in humanitarian politics (Fassin 2005). Politics based on triggering good emotions often end disregarding universal rights.<sup>3</sup> Strong evidence shows how this process works in terms of political asylum (Kelly 2012; Tiktin 2011), charity (Elisha 2008; Mettermaier 2012), foreign aid (Paragi 2017), and good governmentality. Additionally, scholars have noted that compassion assumes a position of privilege (Berlant 2004). A tool of neo-liberalism (Muehlebach 2011), its roots lie in colonialism (Balkenhol 2016). Echoing Hannah Arendt, Muehlebach argues that managing politics with emotions such as sympathy

and compassion “unites citizens through the particularities of cosuffering and dutiful response, rather than the universality of rights; through the passions ignited by inequality rather than presumptions of equality; and through emotions, rather than politics (2011, p. 62). A corresponding discussion of the political context of empathy has been lacking.<sup>4</sup>

To promote a more complex understanding of empathy in its social and political context, without entirely discarding its moral implications, I follow the lead of recent psychological anthropologists who have turned to earlier discussions of empathy in the German language, especially those of Edmund Husserl (Hollan and Throop 2011; Throop 2012; Duranti 2010). According to Husserl, empathy is the basis of intersubjective experience. It happens when we attribute intentionality to another by putting ourselves in their shoes. According to Alessandro Duranti, Husserl’s concept of intersubjectivity has been misunderstood and mistranslated as “mutual understanding” starting from the earliest English translations in the 1930s (2010, p. 21). Noting that Husserl often used words such as “*Wechselverständigung*” and “*Platzwechsel*,” Duranti points out that Husserl’s locus of intersubjective experience was “the possibility of changing places . . . or trading places” (2010, p. 21), not necessarily of mutual understanding. Accordingly, empathy does not mean that “we simultaneously come to the same understanding of any given situation (although this can happen), but that we have, to start, the possibility of exchanging places, of seeing the world from the point of view of the Other” (Duranti 2010, p. 21).

The complexity of empathy lies exactly in the fact that even though humans can imagine the possibility of exchanging places and can infer what others might be experiencing from their different standpoints, full access to their experiences is never possible.<sup>5</sup> In Husserl’s words:

Each person has, from the same place in space and with the same lighting, the same view of, for example, a landscape. But never can the other, at exactly the same time as me have the exact same appearance as I have. My appearances belong to me, his to him.

(in Duranti 2010, p. 21)

We can always misread someone’s emotions just as we can misinterpret someone’s words. How individuals fill in the gap between the experiences of others and their understanding of these experiences is as complex as the original intersubjective connection. Husserl’s concept of *paarung*, translated as coupling and pairing, gives insights in how this process of filling the gaps works.

For Husserl, empathizers’ previous experiences shape their experiences of empathy through pairing, the process in which we pair our bodies with that of another. He describes this process through the experience of his own two hands touching each other: “When my left hand touches my right, I am experiencing myself in a manner that anticipates both the way in which

an Other would experience me and the way in which I would experience another” (in Zahavi 2003, p. 104). We can anticipate how it would feel for someone else to touch our hands based on our own touch, but we can never really know how it feels for them. Clearly, embodied intersubjectivity is the most crucial aspect of Husserl’s understanding of pairing and the resulting empathy. However, I suggest that Husserl’s concept of *paarung* can extend the basis of intersubjectivity from the body to social positioning.

Husserlian or not, phenomenology in general has been commonly criticised for its focus on the immediate and subjective experience that does not take objective political, social, or economical structural conditions into account (Throop and Murphy 2002). In the last decade, scholars have come to recognize that Husserl’s understanding of empathy must incorporate history, politics, and society to understand how intersubjective experience is shaped (Desjarlais and Throop 2010). Here, I point out that Husserl already acknowledges “what I have learnt in the past does not leave me untouched. It shapes my understanding and interpretation of new objects by reminding me of what I have experienced before” (in Zahavi 2014, p. 132). It is exactly past experiences – either accidental or structural – that influence how two different individuals have diverse experiences even when they swap places, or how they can momentarily imagine themselves in yet a third place, as is the case for minority and majority Muslims who empathize with the Jewish victims of the Holocaust. Thus, empathic experiences are not only bodily but also socially and historically situated.

The situated nature of intersubjective experience is easier to understand if we explain Husserl’s understanding of empathy in a simple analogy of swapping shoes. The empathizer does not take off just any pair of shoes to put herself in another pair but takes off one specific pair. They may be her favorite, or they may be too tight. Thus, the process of pairing that enables empathy to happen is not abstract, but pairs particular shoes worn at a particular time and place under particular circumstances by individuals of certain social standing and cultural influences. Anyone has the capacity to imagine themselves in someone else’s shoes. Nevertheless, the emotional reactions shoe swapping triggers in each person will be shaped by individual past experiences and social positioning. This approach to intersubjectivity allows us to understand how history, society, and politics are always already part of the immediate experience – and hence, how there can never be one empathetic prescription for any given situation, as I demonstrate in the following example of minority Germans relating to Jewish victims of the Holocaust.

### **History of empathy after Auschwitz**

Following their victory in 1945, the Allied Forces occupied Germany, with the stated purpose of transforming the physically, politically, and morally ruined country into a peaceful and prosperous democracy. In this process,



they approached National Socialism as a kind of German exceptionalism and found the sources of fascism in German culture and psychology. For Americans, the strongest Allied power, democracy was not only a matter of elections, jurisdiction, and parliament, but “also a type of behaviour, a public attitude, and an affective relationship to the state, independent of those other political institutions” (Fay 2008, p. xiv). Americans vigorously promoted the idea that inculcating certain emotions toward the victims of National Socialism was crucial for Germany’s re-education and normalization (Parkinson 2015). Western Allies tried to make Germans face what they had done by making them walk through death camps, watch films, and look at pictures of suffering victims (Jarausch 2006). During these activities, they closely scrutinized the Germans’ emotional expressions. In her study of post-war Germany, Anne Parkinson discusses how lack of emotion, and especially lack of melancholia and sadness, was often seen as the root of the German problem and the element that made Germans seen unfit for democracy. According to her, both Americans and Germans characterized post-war Germany as “suffering from coldness or *Gefuehlskaelte* and emotional rigidity or *Gefuehlsstarke* frozen affect and emotional inability” (Parkinson 2015, p. 5). Sociologists, psychologists, and anthropologists came together in the United States under new funding schemes to figure out what was wrong with the emotional makeup of German culture and how it could be rehabilitated (Fay 2008).

German philosopher Theodor Adorno played a key role in formulating an approach to coming terms with the Holocaust as we know it today. One of the founders of critical theory in the Frankfurt School, Adorno spent World War II in exile in the United States. During that time, he wrote about the German authoritarian personality, anti-Semitism, propaganda, and how to develop German democracy (Mariotti 2016). Upon his return to Germany, he was influential in shaping post-War German political culture. He urged that, “The premier demand upon all education is that Auschwitz not happen again” (Adorno 2005, p. 191). Adorno believed that proper education would foster mature self-critical, self-aware citizens who are resistant to authoritarian tendencies (French and Thomas 1999). He advocated a confrontational social-psychological approach toward the Nazi past (Meseth 2012) and critical self-reflection (Cho 2009).

German memory culture and Holocaust education have undergone multiple transformations since the end of World War II. At every turn, tendencies for “ritualized regret” (Olic 2007) competed with a desire to recognize all Germans as victims of the war and to relativize the crimes of National Socialists (Niven 2006). In the 1980s, conservative German historians stated that it was time to embrace a positive nationalism and accept that Nazi crimes were cruel, but comparable to other totalitarian violations, especially those conducted by the USSR (Kampe 1987). After German unification philosopher Jurgen Habermas relied on Adorno’s legacy in his strong opposition to those who wanted to relativize and trivialize the Holocaust. By doing

so, he “translated Adorno’s standpoint on the pedagogical aims of working through history as a model of critical remembrance into a protocol of ideal citizenship” (Ball 2009, p. 47) in Germany, and also in Europe. Major post-unification projects such as the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, which opened in Berlin in 2005, and the establishment of the foundation Remembrance, Responsibility, and the Future (EWZ) in 2000 to compensate Nazi slave workers, are manifestations of Habermas’ influence as they single out Jews as victims and Germans with roots in the Third Reich as perpetrators in the crimes of National Socialism (Wolfgram 2010). In contemporary Germany, a self-aware, self-critical, and victim centered approach toward the Holocaust is considered “a core guarantor for the stability of Germany’s liberal-democratic order” (von Bieberstein 2016, p. 909).

Ironically, the approach that resists relativizing the Holocaust limits the responsibility and benefits of lessons learned from the Holocaust to an ethnified German nation and its European collaborators. As Michael Rothberg and Yasemin Yildiz (2011, p. 35) put it, the paradox of German memory culture is that:

in the aftermath of the Nazi genocide, it has seemed necessary to preserve an ethnically homogeneous notion of German identity in order to ensure Germans’ responsibility for the crimes of the recent past, even though that very notion of ethnicity was one of the sources of those crimes.

In 1998, German Jewish historian Dan Diner, for example, argued against changing citizenship laws to allow immigrant naturalization on the basis that belonging to the German nation followed having memories of and rejecting the Holocaust.

Those whose memory reaches back to the Nazi past, and this first and foremost, by its rejection, do belong dialectically to an ethnified German collective. Germans are those [who] define themselves in terms of belonging by rejection of the Nazi past. A German citizen of Turkish background can hardly fully belong to such a collective. He cannot use the common ‘we’ concerning the contaminated past of Germany.

(Diner in Rothberg and Yildiz 2011, p. 35)

Jurgen Habermas himself stated that coming to terms with the Nazi past was necessary and beneficial for ethnic Germans who committed the genocide: “a coherent and truthful self-interpretation is supposed to make it possible for *us* to critically appropriate and take responsibility for *our own life-history*” (Habermas 1997, p. 18, italics mine). In that sense, as the Holocaust became “a primal phantasmatic scene of guilt and shame around which German national identifications are organized” (Lewis 2013, p. 105), both the responsibility for and the opportunity of learning lessons from the

Holocaust was seen to be mainly for ethnic German nationals. Within this context, late-comers who were not directly involved with the Holocaust have been left outside Germany's national memory culture (Konuk 2007; Rothberg and Yıldız 2011; Chin and Fehrenbech 2009; Partridge 2010; Baer 2013).

### **Wrong empathy for the Holocaust**

I observed these instances during my ethnographic research on Muslim minorities and Holocaust education in Germany conducted over five years during 2006–2008, 2009–2011, and 2013–2014, and on multiple short-term visits since 2016. Most of this research was conducted in Berlin, home to 220,000 Muslims mostly of Turkish and Arab backgrounds (Muehe 2010).<sup>6</sup> I also conducted extensive research in post-industrial Duisburg, which has a high percentage of immigrants,<sup>7</sup> and traveled to other West German towns to observe Holocaust education programs devoted to Muslim and immigrant communities. These education programs can be located via organizations such as Wannsee House of Conference, Anne Frank House, Action Reconciliation Service for Peace, and Kruezberg Initiative against Anti-Semitism. They regularly work with Muslim minorities for Holocaust education and anti-Semitism prevention. I also found individual programs and projects organized by groups such as Muslim Youth, Neukoelln Mothers in Berlin, Workers Union in Berlin, Karame youth club in Berlin, and Zitrone youth club in Duisburg through personal contacts and internet research.

Over the years, I observed dozens of short- and long-term Holocaust education programs catering to and/or organized by Muslim minorities. I conducted over 50 individual interviews with Turkish- and Arab-background Germans living in Berlin, Duisburg, and Aachen about their encounters with the Holocaust memory in Germany, as well as over a dozen interviews with teachers and educators who regularly deliver Holocaust education to Muslim-minority Germans, among others. These interviews were conducted in German, English, and Turkish, depending on the interviewees' wishes. I also observed ninth grade history classes at a mixed-track school that caters mostly to non-German-background students in Berlin. In comments repeatedly heard from educators, and in personal observations made during this research, Turkish- and Arab-background Germans were often judged as reacting wrongly to the Holocaust, especially with fear, envy, and withdrawal. In what follows, I explore such instances ethnographically.

#### *Fear*

Nazmiye is a petite and well-spoken woman in her 40s who was born in Turkey but has lived in Germany since she was 7 years old. I met her because I heard that she organized Holocaust education for immigrant women.<sup>8</sup> She

has been the coordinator of Neighbourhood Mothers (*die Stadteilmuttern*) in Neukölln, where immigrant women teach effective parenting methods to other immigrant women. When she started working as a trainer in 2006, there was considerable discussion about pogroms against Jews:

Because I grew up in Germany since I was 7, I knew about the pogroms, but the women who had grown up in Turkey did not know anything about them. Around that same time my friend's nephew visited Austria. There he bought a copy of Hitler's *Mein Kampf* and was talking about it. At the time, there were a lot of attacks against foreigners in East Germany. We wanted to learn why there was such an explosion of hatred.

One partner of the Neighbourhood Mothers is Action Reconciliation Service for Peace, the main Christian organization in Germany dedicated to atonement for the Holocaust. They quickly organized a program for the Neukölln mothers about the Nazi period. Nazmiye told me that even though they learned a lot, the training was a very disturbing experience for all of them:

We were all shocked. How could a society turn so fanatical? We started to ask if they could do such a thing to us as well. We spent a lot of time wondering whether we would find ourselves in the same position as the Jews.

This is exactly the position Juliana told me that German educators find so disturbing when they teach minorities about the Holocaust. Other Germans apparently found it even less tolerable and reacted harshly when Nazmiye and her friends voiced their fear:

A month later we were at a church in Nikolassee as part of our training program. We told them about our project and then told them that we are afraid of being victims. The people at the church became really angry at us. They told us to go back to our countries if this is how we think. I was really surprised at their reaction. I could not understand why this is not a legitimate question. Germans can ask this question, too. In Neukölln's local parliament the NPD (National Democratic Party, a Neo-Nazi front) is represented. They are very strong in East Germany. Why should I not be concerned about the Nazis?

During the heated conversation, Nazmiye repeated Holocaust Survivor Primo Levi's statement: it happened once, so it can happen again. But this made the ladies in the church even more furious. Nazmiye and her friends were asked to leave the church. Nazmiye's face turned red when she told me this story. She was reliving the shock she experienced when she was confronted with extreme anger while expecting to be admired for her interest in the history of the country of her new citizenship.

Since I finished my research, Islamophobic attacks have increased dramatically in Germany. In the first official report of anti-Muslim hate crimes in Germany, the German Ministry of Internal Affairs reported that close to 1,000 hate crimes committed against Muslims and mosques were reported in 2017, which left 33 people injured (Deutsche Welle 2018). These attacks intensify feelings of fear among the Muslim minority. At the time of my interviews, I found out that intense fear was more common among first-generation immigrants than members of the second and third generations. When I asked whether they think something like the Holocaust could ever happen again in Germany, almost all second- and third-generation Turkish- and Arab-Germans who grew up in Germany confidently told me that this would be impossible even though racism is still alive in parts of Germans society. A more common reaction I observed in relation to the Holocaust memory among second- and third-generation Muslim-Germans was a sense of unfairness because discrimination toward Muslims in Germany and around the world goes unrecognized. This emotional reaction is reminiscent of sibling rivalry or envy, and is one that Holocaust educators commonly dismiss as “victim competition.”

### *Envy*

In 2013, I joined an interfaith youth group tour to Auschwitz called “Where was G-d at Auschwitz?” initiated by the Dortmund chapter of Muslim Youth (*Muslimische Jugend*).<sup>9</sup> Muslim Youth members explained to me that this was the second tour they had initiated. As a group striving to develop a German-Muslim identity, I was told, it was essential to learn more about this part of history and come to terms with it. Eight 16–20-year-old youth members of Catholic, Protestant, and Muslim communities in Dortmund – as well as two from the Jewish community – were present, along with two adult representatives from each group.

The first stop on the trip was the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin. The tour guide assigned to us was half Latin American, half Israeli and a recent immigrant to Berlin. Our group started with a discussion of how one should feel in relation to the monument and what it stands for. The guide asked students how they were feeling. A member of the Protestant group who had a troubled look on his face answered with one word: “Guilty.” The guide shrugged his shoulders and rhetorically asked what feeling guilty is good for. The first young man tried to defend his feelings: “My grandfather was an SS soldier. I cannot help feeling guilty here. The feeling just comes to me.” A member of the Muslim group, a 15-year-old young man with Moroccan background, joined the conversation: “To me guilt is a very negative feeling. I do not feel guilty.” The guide ended the discussion by directing them to how he thinks they should be feeling: “It is true that guilt is a negative and pessimistic feeling. It does not help anything.

We do not want this. Empathy is the right feeling. We need to think about how this history is part of today.”

The fact that the guide wanted the group to make what is learned from history part of today made the Muslim members of the group visibly excited. A few of them surrounded the tour guide when he gave the group some free time. Alaa, a young woman of Turkish descent, approached the guide and said,

Look, I also feel like a victim in society. I am marginalized everywhere in German society. I want to show that I am also here but I cannot get any support. The government didn't give us any support for this trip because we are a Muslim organization. And now that I am here I feel more frightened. What do you recommend that I do?

The guide looked at the young woman sympathetically and recommended that she move to Berlin when she is old enough, reassuring her that she will not feel like she is judged all the time in Berlin.

Not exactly impressed by the guide's dismissive response, Alaa and other Muslim participants kept trying to explain to anyone with a sympathetic ear that coming to memorial sites makes them feel fearful of being discriminated against, and they are frustrated that their fear is not taken seriously. At a public event, I had heard one member of the group, Esma, give a presentation on the similarities between anti-Semitism and Islamophobia, with images of Muslims taken all over the world from the covers of respectable German weekly magazines. She mentioned how in 2012 a German politician argued that employers should inform the state about their Muslim employees, especially whether or not they prayed. This time our conversation took place in Oswiecim, Poland, the site of Auschwitz, and Esma brought religion up again. She said,

Do you realize how scary such things are once you are here? When you see the yellow stars, Jews were wearing. . . . Or when you stand in front of the Muselmann sculpture at the camp. . . . Non-Muslims in this society do not understand why we feel afraid when we come here. They get angry at us and say mean things, like we try to belittle the Holocaust and we are anti-Semitic. Or they roll their eyes and say we try to play the victim role to attract attention.

Esma was referring to a representative statue in the Auschwitz exhibit. The name of the statue – Muselmann – was a slang word used in the extermination camps to refer to inmates who became resigned and apathetic to their environment and fate as a result of starvation, exhaustion, and hopelessness. There is no consensus as to why the word Muselmann became the term for people in this desperate condition. Giorgio Agamben argues, “The most likely explanation of the term can be found in the literal meaning



of the Arabic word Muslim: the one who submits unconditionally to the will of God” (Agamben 2002, p. 45).<sup>10</sup> According to Yad Vashem Shoa Research Center, inmates likened the weak state of these individuals to images of Muslims prostrating in prayer.<sup>11</sup> In reality, no Muslim captives were brought to the camp because they were Muslims; however, the idea that inmates in the worst condition were likened to Muslims or that “they became Muslims” (De Koning 2015) visibly unsettled Muslim members of the group and intensified their feelings of fear.

Later that day, Esma shared her impression that the whole emphasis on guilt was an excuse for not doing anything about discrimination and racism today.

All these Protestant and Catholic people in our group who say they feel guilty and cry their eyes out are just swimming in history and in their own emotions. Most of their emotions have nothing to do with the Holocaust!

Esma was referring to the group discussion after our tour of the first camp in Auschwitz, which was very emotional for all of us. After a while, I noticed that a good number of the Christian Germans started talking about their personal dramas. One girl talked about a friend who had committed suicide; another could not stop crying about her parents’ divorce. Group discussion quickly moved from the Holocaust to the central question of “Where was G-d in Auschwitz?” – meaning, why God does not interfere in horrible situations? Protestant youth in the group expressed particular anger at God for not being there for their friends, or for them, just like God had not prevented the Holocaust.

As the group discussion became increasingly emotional and personal, Muslim members repeatedly tried to bring the topic to current affairs. As a few participants sobbed, Alaa picked up the teddy bear that participants took turns holding, to show that it was her turn to talk:

Today we experienced intense emotions. We all cried. But let’s now think about what we bring to today. Let us talk about what is happening in Germany and in the world. Let us make sure that our tears are not in vain.

Later, Alaa told me that she wanted to bring up the topic of the suffering of Palestinians. Instead, because a few members of the group looked overwhelmed by emotion, the social workers decided to end the group discussion. The next day, Protestant social workers told me that they were extremely happy that the Muslims were there. They thought making links between the Holocaust and today’s events are good that care was needed to make sure that no tragedy or case of discrimination was compared to the Holocaust.

***Withdrawal***

Selma was born in the late 1980s as the daughter of a Turkish immigrant worker in southern Germany. When I met her she was an MA student at a university in London. When I asked her what it was like learning about German history as a non-German, she quickly told me how from a young age, she learned how not to open her mouth on this topic. Her first interaction with Holocaust history in school in the fourth grade at age 10 marked her for the rest of her life:

We were learning about the Holocaust for the first time. The teacher told us that six million Jews were killed during the Holocaust. When I heard that I thought the number must have been bigger. I raised my hand and asked “did only six million Jews die?” The teacher became very angry at me and said “what do you mean by *only* six [million]?” I swear to God that I had no aim of belittling the number of murdered Jews; I did not even know much about the Holocaust, and I had thought the number was higher. After that incident, my teacher was not nice to me at all.

Selma explained to me how her teacher’s attitude changed in a way that was again puzzling to her.

At the end of that year the same teacher wanted to show us a film about Anne Frank. She took us to a darkened room in the basement and set up a projector. It was the first time I watched this film. I was so touched by it that I could not keep myself from crying and sobbing through the film. Even though I was deep in my emotions, I suddenly felt someone looking at me. When I raised my eyes, I saw that at the corner of the room my teacher was looking at me and grinning. After the film, she came over to me and put her hand on my shoulder. After that incident she was very nice to me.

Both reactions left Selma puzzled. “Since then, I always remain quiet when the topic of the Holocaust and National Socialism is discussed. I am afraid I may say a wrong thing and leave a wrong impression.” Selma learned at age 10 about how she was under scrutiny about whether she related to the Holocaust in the right way and that her reactions had severe consequences. Maybe those who pass through the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe quickly without showing any emotions are like Selma. Perhaps they rush through it without showing any emotions, hoping they will not be reprimanded for making a mistake.

**Conclusion**

Unlike in most Western liberal democracies, claiming victim status (Fassin and Rechtman 2009) is not politically favorable for legitimacy in Germany.

The memory culture embraced after German unification is specifically positioned against continuous attempts to bring up German victimhood during National Socialism (Niven 2006). Hence, it is sensitive about victimhood claims by any group other than Holocaust victims (von Bieberstein 2016). Simultaneously, since unification the Holocaust is shifting from a burden of debilitating shame to proof of German responsibility (Markovits 2006; Welch and Wittlinger 2011). Germany's ability to confront its dark past is increasingly seen as a sign of special moral qualifications that legitimize its appearance on the world stage again (Frochtner 2014). When Muslim-minority youth appear to compete with Jews for victim status or express fear that something like the Holocaust might happen to them, they lose their chance to be heard legitimately in the discussion circle in Auschwitz and outside of it. Such expressions underscore accusations that those of the Muslim minority are emotionally and cognitively deficient, and perceive Jews as radically other and morally unfit to be legitimate members of German society. When Muslim-Germans express fear, they are judged to lack the cognitive skills required to understand how different today's Germany is from that of the 1930s. When they express envy, they do not seem to have the level of maturity necessary for full participation in German democracy. On the other hand, another perspective on empathy – a situated one – gives us clues on how to understand such unprescribed emotions as a deep connection with the Jewish victims of the Holocaust and new, non-nationalist contributions to the tradition of coming to terms with the past in Germany.

Edmund Husserl tells us that establishing an intersubjective connection based on our own bodily experience is the starting point of gaining a perspective about what other persons might be experiencing in their own bodies. According to him, we grasp the other's body as something similar to our own (in Luo 2017, p. 45). Unanticipated and unprescribed emotional connections that some minority Germans who have experienced discrimination established with the Jewish Holocaust victims demonstrate that our socially situated experience is central to our window on understanding others' experiences (Throop, this volume; Hollan, this volume). When we see a racialized, classed, or gendered individual, especially one who experiences discrimination, we have insight into how they might feel because we each have standing in a society that ranks people in terms of such categories. This empathy is why, when confronted with reminders of the Holocaust, some Turkish- and Arab-background Germans fear that they might be victims if something like this were to happen again. Others establish a likeness between their own racialization and that of the Jews, and feel envy that anti-Semitism is acknowledged whereas Islamophobia is disregarded. The unexpected feelings Muslim-background Germans expressed during my fieldwork run counter to the expectations of Holocaust education programs aimed at triggering feelings of remorse and responsibility. Muslims expressing feelings outside this framework were judged to be lacking in moral qualities and the capacity to be good citizens. Yet, a Husserlian understanding of empathy shows us that feelings triggered by putting on someone else's shoes

starts from and ends in the shoes one already owns. Hence, an ethnic German and a racialized minority German wearing differently positioned shoes will not feel the same way when they put themselves in the shoes of Jewish Holocaust victims before eventually returning to their own shoes. However, as long as they swap shoes, they experience strong empathic connection with the victims of the Holocaust.

Even though Holocaust education programs in Germany now recognize that not everyone in Germany is an ethnic German with roots in the Third Reich, many do not acknowledge that a diverse society will generate different legitimate reactions to even the biggest tragedy, the gravest wrongdoing. Ironically, otherwise admirable efforts of coming to terms with Germany's racist past have also become a mechanism for excluding racialized minorities from the moral fold of the German nation. At a time when Holocaust perpetrators and survivors are dying and German society is becoming increasingly more diverse, German national self-definition continues to be based on a single model of empathic connection toward the victims of the Holocaust. Those who arrived Germany after World War II challenge this approach and show there are many ways to connect with the Holocaust, many ways to infer what its victims might have experienced, and many ways to draw lessons that relate to today.

## Notes

- 1 Yahuda Goodman and Mizrachi (2008) discuss how Israeli schoolteachers use different memory methods to teach Jews from Europe and North America compared to Middle Eastern and North African Jews, who also have different class standing.
- 2 See: [www.facebook.com/zuck/videos/10103671105741461/?autoplay\\_reason=gatekeeper&video\\_container\\_type=1&video\\_creator\\_product\\_type=7&app\\_id=2392950137&live\\_video\\_guests=0](https://www.facebook.com/zuck/videos/10103671105741461/?autoplay_reason=gatekeeper&video_container_type=1&video_creator_product_type=7&app_id=2392950137&live_video_guests=0)
- 3 Others have also explored how hope has been seen as necessary for the reproduction of capitalism (Narotzky and Besnier 2014), political reform (Sukarieh 2012), the development of management (Irina 2016), and how it has been unevenly distributed in society (Hage 2003).
- 4 For a through review of phenomenological approaches in anthropology see Desjarlais and Throop (2012).
- 5 Different societies act on different assumptions about how accessible other minds are. Joel Robbins and Rumsey (2008) co-edited a special journal issue of *Anthropological Quarterly* on a widespread belief in the Pacific that it is extremely difficult to know other people's minds, which they call "the doctrine of the opacity of other minds."
- 6 Since then, around 55,000 refugees have arrived in Berlin, of whom a significant percent are Muslims.
- 7 Duisburg is notorious for its neighborhoods such as Marxloh, with 64% of its population consisting of immigrant-background residents. Most are from Turkey, and some are Roma from Southeastern Europe.
- 8 This project is also discussed in detail by Michael Rothberg and Yildiz (2011). They point out similar ways in which other immigrant-background women engaged with the Holocaust memory. In that sense, Nazmiye's perspective reflects that of dozens of other women who took part in the project.

- 9 Established in 1994, *Muslimische Jugend* promotes a Muslim youth culture based on a German identity and Islamic principles. For a long time, it was included on the watch list of the government agency responsible for protecting the constitution. It was recently taken off the list.
- 10 See Primo Levi's description of this figure (1959, 103).
- 11 See: [www.yadvashem.org/odot\\_pdf/Microsoft%20Word%20-%206474.pdf](http://www.yadvashem.org/odot_pdf/Microsoft%20Word%20-%206474.pdf)

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Part III

# Imagining others

Encounters beyond the human





## 10 Just like humans

### Similarity, difference and empathy towards nonhumans in the Amazonian rainforest

*Francesca Mezzenzana*

After living for a few months in a village in the Ecuadorian Amazon, the region where I have done fieldwork since 2011, my 3-year-old son started hitting dogs. It was an awkward experience: when we returned from the village to the main city, he would threaten with a stick any dog we encountered in the street. I was very uncomfortable with his behaviour and often screamed at him, but he seemed unable to understand the reasons of my anger. After all, his behaviour was condoned, if not actively encouraged, by most adults and children in the Runa village where we had been living. I did not know what to do or how to behave. An afternoon, as we were walking home with a colleague, we encountered a stray dog asleep on the footpath: as soon as my son saw it, he quickly grabbed a stone and attempted to throw it at the dog, shouting “Don’t be lazy! Go away!” My friend ironically said to me: “You should include *that* in your research on Runa empathy towards nonhumans!”.

I was taken aback. My friend found it paradoxical that, while I set out to investigate Runa children’s empathy towards nonhumans – the focus of my last fieldwork – my toddler son, imitating his friends and family in the village, had turned into a dog beater. With that ironic exclamation, he probably wanted to push me to reflect on what looked like an unsettling paradox: the fact that my son had so readily learned to beat up dogs after a few months in a Runa village seemed like an obvious sign that there was very little empathy towards nonhumans among locals. To me, however, his reaction offered a compelling invitation to clarify, on the one hand, what I meant by “empathy”, while on the other hand, to think about how empathic-like processes are indissolubly intertwined with local ideas about humans and nonhumans. In other words, through this seemingly problematic episode, I started to think about the need to articulate how, in general, and more specifically for the Runa of the Ecuadorian Amazon, empathetic manifestations towards nonhumans are shaped by assumptions about similarity and difference between people and animals.

I shall start by trying to clarify my use of the term empathy in this chapter. By “empathy”, I refer to “the experience of the embodied mind of the other, an experience which rather than eliminating the difference between

self-experience and other-experience takes the asymmetry to be a necessary and persisting existential fact” (Zahavi 2014, p. 151). According to this definition, inspired by phenomenological works by Husserl, Scheler and Stein, empathy is understood to be the basic capacity to experience the mindedness of others. Conceived as the direct perception of the embodied minds of others, empathy does not entail any kind of emotional contagion or involve any projections of one’s feelings onto others: it is a morally neutral capacity to recognise others in their full “otherness”. Importantly, it does not presuppose any shared experience. Distinct from sympathy, empathy constitutes the very way in which we perceive others as “others”, distinct from the self. To make the difference clearer: following this definition, my friend’s comment on my son’s behaviour towards dogs would have not referred to a lack of empathy, but rather to a lack of sympathy, since my son clearly perceived dogs as minded subjects: the lack regarded the fact that he seemed not to feel any compassion towards them.

In this chapter, I will draw on the phenomenological distinction between empathy and sympathy, since I find it useful to advance some claims about Runa ways of experiencing nonhuman others – yet, I do not believe that we can distinguish between “empathy” and “sympathy” at all times and in all contexts. As Douglas Hollan notices, the fact that cross-culturally, we often find manifestations of empathy associated with emotional states such as pity, compassion and sympathy, seems to raise “the more general issue of whether ‘empathy’ per se is ever to be found in a relatively pure, isolated state” (2017, p. 343). Rather than setting an a priori definition of empathy, Hollan urges anthropologists to look at how “empathic-like processes” – all those kinds of lower-level and higher-level aspects of social cognition which are related to empathy – are manifested during everyday sociality. In this chapter, I thus explore various facets of empathy but do not attempt to reach an overarching definition as to what “empathy” is or should be. My task is complicated by the fact that among the Runa, there are no clear terms for empathy. In Amazonian Kichwa, the language spoken by the Runa, the closest word to empathy is *llaki*, which could be translated as “to feel sadness, pity, happiness” and which bears some resemblance to the concept of sympathy. *Llaki* is an important emotion through which Runa people frame their relationships with certain categories of animals, and it constitutes a fundamental concept to think about issues of empathy and sympathy.

This chapter is inherently comparative. In shedding light on Runa “empathic-like” processes towards nonhumans and specific cultural understandings about humans’ relationship with animals, I constantly contrast my ethnographic materials with research done in Western countries (mainly the United States and the UK) on human–animal relationships.<sup>1</sup> This comparative material “closer to home” comes from research in developmental psychology and the cognitive sciences, as well as from my observations of foreign visitors in Runa villages. My central claim in this chapter is that in

order to investigate empathy-like processes towards nonhumans, we first need to pay attention to local understandings of similarity and difference between animals and people. Another closely related claim is that, to do so, we need to explore the role played by direct experience and imagination in shaping people's perceptions of nonhuman others.

If empathy consists of the recognition of others as minded creatures like us, a question which needs to be addressed regards the nature of this perceived "aliqueness". Developmental psychologists have shown that, soon after birth, infants are attracted to animate objects which display self-directed movement and intentionality (Spelke et al. 1995). This discovery has led them to argue that, as humans, we have an innate ability to recognise other minded creatures. The question of similarity or ontological closeness constantly resurfaces, more or less explicitly, in discussions on empathy.

For instance, Italian neurobiologist Vittorio Gallese (2001), one of the scientists behind the discovery of mirror neurones, argues that empathy is intimately linked to motor imitation. One feels empathy towards someone who is in pain because the act of visually witnessing the other's pain activates an imitative response in the perceiver, who then comes to feel in his own body what it is like to be that other. Gallese's definition of empathy is thus that of an embodied state which originates with the perceiver and which can only exist if the perceiver has either already gone through the same condition of the perceived subject or the same sensory apparatus enabling identification. From this account, it follows quite logically that the perceived has to be in some way ontologically similar to the perceiver, since this latter has to use his own experience to make sense of the other's. Were this other to be truly "other", there would be no way for me to know him. Like in many other approaches to empathy which are heavily based on imaginative projection, the "other" in its original otherness is ultimately an unfathomable entity. There cannot be any knowledge of the other, unless we recognise in the other something which we have experienced, too. Such approaches have their origins in the same dilemmas which afflicted generations of Western philosophers and which find their best examples in Descartes's work on the *cogito* or in John Locke's argument for analogy. Such accounts suggest that, since all we can know directly is the content of one's own mind, knowledge about others can only then be indirect and analogical, namely, based on one's subjective experience.

This is a thorny issue in discussions about human intersubjectivity, and it becomes even more so in the case of human-nonhuman interactions. While the principle for analogy can be applied, at least in principle, in cases of human intersubjective encounters, it becomes difficult to do so in the case of nonhuman others whose lives are deemed to be so radically "other" from ours to make any recognition or feeling of what it "means to be like them" almost inconceivable, or at least ridden with ethical challenges. In his essay "What is it like to be a bat?" (1974), philosopher Thomas Nagel famously argues that despite being possible to imagine "what is like" to be a bat,

this imaginative interpretation would nevertheless fail to capture the experience of the bat *from the bat's point of view*, since as humans, we do not have access to its sensorial equipment and thus to its specific form of consciousness. Nagel concludes that all we have access to is our own subjective experience and that any other type of glimpse onto another individual's life is third-person knowledge. More recently, on a similar vein, philosopher Michael Marder (2012) argued against the possibility of feeling empathy towards nonhumans, and more specifically, towards plants. According to him, empathy towards plants is impossible since plant life is so radically dissimilar from ours. Given that “the likelihood of empathy is grounded in the degrees of ontological proximity (and distance) between the human empathizer and the living object of empathy” (Marder 2012, p. 262), he argues that any attempt to empathise with plants cannot be other than a projection of human values and feelings onto them. In his view, empathic manifestations towards plants replicate a human-centred world and deny the radical alterity of vegetal life forms.

Marder's suggestion raises with clarity some of the issues I will be grappling with in this chapter. One of the central assumptions of these debates is that “others” – and in particular, nonhuman others – are fundamentally different and thus “unknowable” to us. However, as I will show in this chapter, this is an idea the Runa with whom I work would have trouble agreeing with (as, one might argue, anyone who works and lives close to animals; see Candea 2010; Smuts 2001, Webb et al. this volume). While the similarity described by developmental and social psychologists might be a sufficient condition for the emergence of basic forms of empathy, a more sophisticated account of similarity and difference is needed for those higher forms of empathy which involve imagination and other cognitive and affective processes. The main question which I will seek to address in this chapter is: how do cultural ideas about animality and humanity effectively shape empathic responses towards nonhumans?

I will first give a general introduction to Runa people's relationships with nonhumans, and in particular, to certain wild animals and pets. I will then explore the meaning of *llakina*, a local Kichwa term which refers to empathic-like processes, with a particular focus on the ways this term is deployed to describe sentiments towards animals. Finally, I shall compare such empathic-like manifestations with “Western” expressions of empathy towards humans. To do so, I will draw on a variety of ethnographic materials, as well as from work on empathy in psychology and the cognitive sciences. I will conclude by reiterating the importance of local notions of similarity and difference for understanding expressions of empathy.

## **The Runa and their animals**

When Mondí, my 10-year-old “sister”, wakes up in the morning, she might find a fresh bat's bite on her leg. We can still hear the bat tweeting, hidden

somewhere inside the leaves of the thatched roof. Getting rid of them is an impossible task: there are no physical barriers to stop the bats – and many other small animals – from entering the house. Even if she is spared by the bats, she will bear marks of other bites from the many insects which enter the sleeping net at night. As soon as she is up, she goes outside to feed the chickens who run free in the yard. She then helps her mother eviscerating the animals – fish or game – her dad caught during the night. School hours, from 8 a.m. to 12.30 p.m. are the only time spent in a relatively closed space with little animal presence. After school, Mondí goes fishing with her brothers, sisters and other children: they first look for worms, then they go down the river in their canoes. She sometimes spends the afternoon in the garden, where she encounters and interacts with a wide range of animals: spiders, bats, lizards, ants, butterflies, birds, fish, dogs, small mammals and, on an unlucky day, snakes. On certain occasions, her father asks her and her brothers to walk in the forest with him, to carry back home some large prey he has killed: during the walk, she will likely spot birds, hear the noises of a distant herd of peccaries and recognise the footprints of tapirs, deer and other terrestrial mammals. She will see more animals as dead prey; it is her duty, and that of other women in the family, to transform the prey into food. She will burn the fur on the fire, cut the large animal, remove the viscera, wash it, butcher it and cook the meat.

Life in the Ecuadorian Amazon, a daily life like that of Mondí, which I just described, is replete with encounters with animals. The Runa of the Ecuadorian Amazon are a Kichwa-speaking people living in the region of Pastaza, in the Ecuadorian Amazon. People in rural villages live mostly on subsistence agriculture, fishing, hunting and some informal labour. From early in life, Runa people are in contact with a variety of animals and plants: in every Runa house, you can find dogs, chickens, monkeys and parrots. Insects – from small mosquitoes to louse – are ubiquitous, and people simply learn to live with their presence. Interactions with animals are vigorous: animals are held, taken care of, killed, dismembered and cooked. From a very early age, children learn to recognise the flight of a toucan, to kill a chicken and to catch small prey and butcher larger animals. The butchering of a large animal is an event of great excitement for young children, who gather around the dead animal in a disordered crowd not to lose sight of its internal anatomy.

In Kichwa, there is no term which easily corresponds to the English category of “nonhuman animals”. People distinguish between animals who live in the forest (*sacha aychaguna*) and those who live in rivers or lagoons (*yacu aychaguna*), but it is only animals which are considered as “prey” that fall into these two groups (where *aycha* means “meat”). For instance, other creatures – such as snakes, insects, dogs and worms who are not edible – do not fall into any of these categories and are simply called by their names. Apart from daily interactions with creatures who live in or near the houses, it is in the context of hunting and fishing that the most valuable encounters

with animals take place. Runa people in the area where I work still live mostly of hunting and fishing: from a very young age, boys and girls spend weeks in hunting sites with their kin, and from the age of 8, boys go with their fathers on hunting trips to the forest while girls are responsible for carrying and butchering prey.

These early and continuous interactions with animals effectively make Runa people into astute and careful connoisseurs of animal behaviour. Like for many other Amazonian people, intentionality and reflexive consciousness for the Runa are not exclusive attributes of humanity (Descola 2013; Fausto 2007; Kohn 2013; Peluso this volume; Viveiros de Castro 2012[1998]). This is evident from Runa myths and story-telling whereby animals are presented as fully humans who later transformed into the animals who inhabit the forest today (Whitten and Whitten 2008); in Runa myths of origins, modern-day animals are ex-humans who retain subjectivity and consciousness. But more than mythology, it is the actual interaction with animals in their everyday life which enables Runa people to recognise animals as subjects with their own intentions and emotional life. Eduardo Kohn has beautifully described how this process of acknowledging other minds is the fruit of living in a place where life depends on the recognition of the intentions of others. As he puts it:

it would be impossible for the Runa to hunt successfully or to engage in any other kind of interaction within this ecology of selves without establishing some sort of set of assumptions about the agencies of the myriad beings that inhabit the forest.

(2007, p. 9)

As noted in the Introduction (this volume), a central assumption in debates on empathy and intersubjectivity is that knowing the other is a difficult endeavour since his true “essence” is concealed and hidden from view. However, as noticed by philosopher Dan Zahavi, this view is based upon a limited view of the self. The mistake here, suggests Zahavi, is to think that selfhood “necessarily refers to purely interior and private states, i.e., states that are not visible in meaningful actions and expressive behavior” (2017, p. 41). He suggests to go beyond the dichotomy of behaviour-reading and mind-reading by taking a phenomenological approach which sees selfhood as manifesting itself through embodied forms and actions in the world. Zahavi quotes phenomenologist Max Scheler, one of the first theorists of empathy, who postulated “the existence of . . . a universal grammar of expression, one that enables us to understand, to some extent at least, the expressions of other species, be it the gasping fish or the bird with the broken wing” (Zahavi 2014, p. 123).

The phenomenological view of selfhood expressed by Scheler resonates with Runa approaches to understanding nonhuman others. To them, knowledge of nonhumans is not thought to be problematic, at least not usually, as



I will explain in what follows. People are not shy about interpreting animal behaviour, based on their experience and their particular knowledge of the animal. When I asked people what kinds of emotions, for instance, dogs might feel, the Runa did not hesitate to attribute animals with interior states by referring to the kind of barking sound, the way the dog moved its tail and jumped, and other visible signs of behaviour – an attitude that most dog lovers would also unproblematically adopt (see Haraway 2008). In a favourite – if not the most favourite – topic of discussion, Runa people spend hours talking about the peculiar characteristics, qualities and attitudes of individual animals and species.

So far, my description of Runa understanding of animals as minded subjects does not sound very different from what is commonly thought by middle-class urban dwellers in countries such as the UK or the United States. One only needs to think of pets and the way they are readily attributed by human owners with a wide variety of emotions, unique traits and qualities. Are then Runa understandings of animals' intentions and emotions – in other words, of animal mindedness – any different from those of middle-class Americans living in an urban context? I believe they are. To support my argument, I draw on a body of research undertaken by psychologists bethany ojalehto, Doug Medin and García Salino (ojalehto et al. 2017) on cross-cultural conceptualisations of life and agency. Their team asked a group of U.S. college students and Ngöbe people – an indigenous people living in Panama – to attribute to a given entity (e.g. animal, plant, inanimate object, etc.), a particular quality or disposition (e.g. capacity to reason, the capacity to feel, to remember, etc.). The objective of the study was to measure how the two cultural groups differently conceptualise agency. One of the results of the study was that the Ngöbe attributed far more agency to animals (and, for that matter, to any other nonhuman subjects) than did the U.S. college students. During my last fieldwork, I reframed and asked some of the questions formulated by ojalehto and colleagues to my Runa friends (adults only). My aim was to gain a sense of how people attributed agency and intentions to nonhuman others and what qualities in particular were constantly attributed (or not) to certain categories of beings. If one compares my results with those of ojalehto and colleagues, one can immediately observe that the Runa, very much like the Ngöbe, readily attributed agency to a variety of nonhuman entities. For instance, all animals in my sample were understood as possessing the capacity to feel, think and remember, capacities which, in contrast, U.S. college students only attributed to larger mammals.

In the questionnaire, I purposefully introduced an animal which the Runa do not directly know – a lion – but of which they have some knowledge through movies, documentaries and children's textbooks. I was interested in seeing how the Runa would conceptualise an animal of which they have little experiential knowledge. Questions about the lion were met by my Runa research participants with puzzlement. Although none had trouble

identifying the lion as a minded other with desires and intentions, people were not comfortable speculating on the details of such “interior” states. My questions were met with vague answers or with explicit statements of ignorance and doubt. To me, such a widespread manifestation of uncertainty seemed surprising, considering that the lion is, after all, a large carnivorous mammal, closely related to the jaguar (an animal the Runa know very well). This was not the only case in which my Runa friends expressed a kind of cautious uncertainty towards animals which they do not personally know. For instance, they would listen with extreme delight to my stories about exotic animals such as sheep and goats. I would draw upon my (scarce) animal knowledge and childhood memories of holidays in Sardinia to satisfy their curiosity regarding the behaviour of goats and sheep. I was usually asked questions about their alimentary habits, but one day, as we were having lunch, my compadre asked me: “Tell me, then: do goats ever get angry?”. The question seemed to me so awkward that I hesitated a little before answering. I replied that I did not know if they got angry. My compadre looked at me and didn’t say anything, so I added: “It is hard to tell. How would I know if goats get angry?”. “You should be able to tell”, my compadre said self-assuredly: “I don’t know if goats get angry, but you’ve seen one; you should be able to tell.” He then kept speculating on whether goats might ever get angry and if so, for what kind of reasons. How would they manifest their anger? From this and the lion example, it seems that Runa empathic understanding of animals – or at least, what they feel they can safely guess about animals’ intentions and feelings – depends on the level of direct engagement people have with them. When this first-hand experience lacks, Runa people seem hesitant to speculate about the inner lives of unknown creatures. Even when they do, they express uncertainty as to whether their suppositions hold any truth – an attitude which starkly differs from the readiness with which people usually interpret the behaviour of familiar animals.

In my earlier discussions of the phenomenological definition of empathy, I mentioned that one of its central claims is that it is a phenomenon limited to one to one direct encounters. Under this perspective, Runa people’s promptness to recognise familiar animals as possessing thoughts and minds seems to represent a kind of “ecological empathy”: an awareness of the ecology of “selves” inhabiting this world. Nevertheless, such empathic understanding of nonhuman others should not be read as something akin to a Western ecological knowledge striving for “objectivity”. The ability to accurately understand and respond to animal behaviour is necessary for survival in the forest: without it, life would simply be impossible. And yet, empathetic knowledge is always shaped by local cultural concerns and pre-occupations. For instance, think of my compadre’s question about goats’ anger: he could have asked a question about any other emotional state – sadness, joy, fear – but he picked the one which for the Runa is the most culturally salient marker of agency: anger (*piñana*). That is to emphasise

that, as Zahavi (2014) notices, empathy – understood as a direct access to others’ subjectivity – does not necessarily provide any deep or accurate knowledge about the other. Furthermore, “direct” access does not mean that it is unmediated by previous knowledge, culture and experience.

The phenomenological definition of empathy I deployed so far has helped me to highlight how the Runa perceive animals as beings capable of thought, feelings and intentions, an ethnographic fact which might not be readily visible if one merges empathy with sympathy, as in the episode of my son and my friend I described at the beginning of this chapter. The distinction also allows us to state quite confidently that the recognition of others’ mindedness does not necessarily translate in a greater emotional engagement with others, nor does it need to be followed by any sympathetic behaviour. From my examples on Runa understandings of animal inner states, it also becomes obvious that, in the messiness of social life, it is impossible to distinguish between “first-level” empathy – as the direct perception of other selves – and more complex empathic-like responses which involve imagination and affective states and which may fall under the conceptual umbrella of sympathy or compassion. In the next section, I will explore the more explicit ways and contexts in which the Runa express compassion towards nonhumans and will suggest that local conceptions of animality and humanity are central to understanding its emergence or absence.

### **Llaki: feeling compassion, love, sorrow**

There are not specific words for empathy in Amazonian Kichwa. The closest term to empathy is *llakina*, which could be translated as “to feel pity, to love, to feel sorrow”, thus approximating the English meaning of compassion/sympathy. Like among the Toraja of Eastern Indonesia described by Hollan (2017), a state of *llakina* usually entails a sentiment of identification with the other and a strong desire to help. *Llakina* is understood as the main reason why people do things for others. For instance, a husband who goes hunting for his hungry wife explains his choice by referring to *llakina*, a feeling of love and pity for his companion. The verb *llaki* does not necessarily denote a negative feeling: indeed, the sense of sorrow and pity comes as a direct consequence of feeling love.

*Llakina* is a word used to describe Runa relationships with the animals they raise. Peter Gow (1989) has beautifully illustrated how for the Piro of the Peruvian Amazon, it is a state of helplessness that usually generates profound feelings of compassion. This state of helplessness is common to people who are alone, who have no kin. For instance, Gow describes how Piro infants who are not yet conceived as social beings are the subject of extreme compassion by others because they are deemed lonely and dependent. Among the Runa, too, helplessness is a state which provokes compassion and concern. More specifically, for the Runa, to be helpless is synonymous with being incapable of taking care of oneself. Infants and wild

animals raised by people are characterised by this quality, and they are both referred to as *huibashca* (“domesticated” or “taken care of”). Animals who are rescued from a hunt and kept as house pets (as, for instance, baby monkeys whose mother is killed by hunters), are thought to remain in this state of helplessness throughout their lives. In contrast with animals of the same species who are from the “forest” (*sachamanda*) and are considered as game (*aycha*), these pets, raised by human owners, are deemed unable to fetch for themselves and to live alone in the forest. Pets include capuchin monkeys, parrots and other varieties of birds, but also peccaries and larger mammals. Orphaned animals are lovingly taken care of by children and women in the house, and their deaths produce great sorrow. The love Runa people can feel towards animals can be very deep and long-lasting; women can breastfeed monkeys or other small mammals, they feed them special foods and carry them everywhere, and consuming their meat is considered a taboo.

Despite these obvious and intense manifestations of compassion towards animals, Runa people do not commonly display *llaki* beyond the category of helpless pets. Foreign visitors who arrive at Runa villages – tourists, government officials, non-governmental organisation (NGO) workers – are often struck by locals’ apparent lack of empathic-like feelings towards animals. I was often a spectator of visitors’ surprise and disappointment at the way Runa people treat their home companions. An exemplary case is that of dogs. As I anticipated in my opening paragraphs, dogs in Runa villages do not have an easy life. Often in poor health, badly fed and mistreated, it is hard for a foreigner not to feel sorry for dogs who live in Runa villages. Dogs are named individually, in contrast with other domestic animals such as ducks and chickens. Most dogs are a mixed breed, one which people refer to as “Runa” (literally “people”). In the past, when dogs were scarce, they constituted a highly sought after resource and could be exchanged for other precious objects such as salt, clothes or meat. Shamans usually had many dogs, given as gifts by patients in return for healing. According to Runa elders, famous shamans in the Bobonaza region could own up to fifty dogs – tangible proof of their shamanic prowess and mastery. Dogs’ main role is that of helping men in the hunt of terrestrial mammals, such as capybaras, armadillos, peccaries and tapirs. Hunting is a rough and deadly business: dogs often lose their lives or get seriously injured. Hunting with many dogs constitutes for a hunter an important protection since they usually walk in the front of their owner and, in cases of any attack by predators, their presence enables the hunter to escape or defend himself. Some dogs are better hunters than others: these are the most cherished by their owners. If they get injured, they will be promptly cared for and given plenty of food. On the contrary, dogs who cannot chase prey, who steal food or engage in any other inappropriate behaviour are often left with very little food, sent away from the house and generally ignored unless they are badly sick. Such behaviour, which so often strikes non-Runa visitors, is ubiquitous and morally unambiguous. As Roy Ellen describes in the context of dog mistreatment among

the indigenous Nuaulu in Indonesia, “what outsiders might regard as unacceptable cruelty is not simply pardonable, but somehow morally neutral” (1999, p. 66).

When I first started my fieldwork in a Runa village in 2011, I took pity upon a small, emaciated dog called Pishnia. Pishnia was never a very good hunting dog, and when she became malnourished, nobody thought of trying to rescue her. I used to give her some of my food, and every time I came back from the city, I brought along some remedies. Whenever my host father saw me giving food to her, he would run to chase her away. After a few months, Pishnia had become fat and happy, almost unrecognisable from the skeletal animal I had first met. My host father cheerfully laughed at my accomplishment. He seemed simultaneously bewildered and amused at my feat. Why weren’t my hosts moved by Pishnia’s obvious suffering? Why wasn’t hunger – a condition which the Runa consider to be the epitome of helplessness – enough to make my hosts feel *llaki* towards that tiny, skeletal creature?

I think that the answer is partially answered by anthropologist Valerio Valeri in an ethnographic piece on domestic animals among the Indonesian Huauulu. Observing the mistreatment of hunting dogs at the hands of their human owners, Valeri writes:

The Huauulu attitude vis-à-vis his dogs is . . . moulded on their attitude to fellow humans. Humans are liked and admired to the extent that they are good companions and good partners, that they give and not only take. Dogs who cease to hunt, who are afraid of wild animals, are despised for their cowardice (the ultimate vice for a Huauulu), and for their parasitic behaviour, just like certain humans are.

(2000, p. 158)

Valeri’s description certainly resonates with Runa attitudes to their dogs. Runa society is based upon a strong sense of conviviality whereby one person’s worth is recognised only insofar as she or he can effectively demonstrate to be able to do things for others. People who are lazy or stingy are effectively ostracised from the group and deemed not to be “real” people. Runa attitudes toward dogs thus seems to closely resemble Runa social interactions. It is in this sense that, as noticed by ethnographer Eduardo Kohn, “there is no place in Runa society for dogs as animals” (2007, p. 10): Runa people consider dogs to be social actors with human-like qualities.<sup>2</sup> Just like a hunter would not feel pity/love towards a hunter who cannot hunt, so does a human owner not feel compassion towards a dog who repeatedly fails to hunt. Dogs are not conceived to be “helpless” as are those pets – captured wild animals – who are usually the recipient of *llaki*. From a Runa perspective, dogs (like humans) are natural predators whose survival should not depend upon the goodwill of others: in contrast, captive animals such as monkeys, tapirs and others who naturally belong to the “forest” (*sacha*) are in an ambiguous status: they have become members of the household and



yet they retain some degree of otherness which is best exemplified by the fact that if left on their own, they cannot survive.

Hunters can, however, feel deep love and compassion towards their dogs. A neighbour from the village of Sarayaku had a very good hunting dog to whom he was very attached. During a hunting trip, he lost his dog to a herd of white-lipped peccaries who devoured it. He told us that when he saw there was nothing left of his dog, he became overwhelmed with fury. Instead of returning home, he decided to follow the peccaries who had killed his dog. When he found the herd, he shot five or six of them in an attack of mindless rage. He then returned home, abandoning their bodies to rot in the forest. In this story, the depth of the hunter's rage is startling: not only that he purposefully went back to shoot the herd of peccaries, but in addition that he left the dead bodies to rot instead of carrying them home to consume – a behaviour which is exceptional by Runa standards. Not only did he consider his dog as a social being whom he sought to avenge, but he also treated the murderous peccaries as persons – as enemies to exterminate, and not as food to be carried back home and eaten. It is not, then, that Runa people never feel compassion towards dogs – but rather they do not love a dog who does not reciprocate his owner. *Llaki* cannot be unconditional. In the aforementioned essay on dogs, Valeri provocatively compares Huaulu attitudes to dogs to Western approaches to pets:

Our niceness towards our pets is due to the fact that they are a mere appendage of ourselves, useless animals whom we like precisely to the extent that they have not a will of their own, that we recognize an abyss between them and us. Our benevolence is that of the despot vis-à-vis his domestic slave.  
(2000, p. 209)

Valeri's observation that the affectionate relationship between pets and their owners in Western industrialised societies is based upon the recognition of an "abyss" is relevant to my discussion on the ways in which different understandings of animality and humanity might shape empathic approaches to nonhumans. I shall return to Valeri's point at the end of the next section. So far, we have seen that *llaki* depends upon intimate, reciprocal engagements with animals that are modelled after human relationships or based upon the recognition of a condition of helplessness. In both cases, a state of *llaki* emerges throughout long-term, sustained contact with animals who either fulfil certain expectations or fit into a specific category. I wish now to offer a telling contrast to this by focusing on two episodes that centred *gringo* (white) peoples' compassionate relationships with animals which provoked great surprise and puzzlement among my Runa hosts.

### **The case of the white boy and the turtle**

Thomas is an 8-year old. His mother Lisa, is of Finnish-English background and has always, in her words, felt a deep attachment to "nature". When



they came on vacation to Ecuador, the Amazon region ranked first in their list of things to see because of its rich biodiversity and the lively cultural traditions of local indigenous people. Lisa contacted a local indigenous guide, Cesar, to arrange a trip to a Runa village. They arrived at Pacayaku, a small Runa village situated on the banks of the Bobonaza. During this stay, Cesar and Antonio, his cousin, brought them to camp in a hunting site located a few hours distance from the village. As they were walking to reach this place, they encountered a large land turtle that Cesar immediately captured. Turtle meat is a delicacy and Cesar and Antonio rejoiced at the thought of bringing it back to the village where they could kill it and eat it with their families. Upon arrival at the campsite, they performed a hole into the bottom extremity of the turtle's shell and tied it to a tree with a rope. Then, they began building a hut for the night. It took them quite a while before realising that Tomas, sat on a fallen tree, was quietly crying. Embarrassed, they asked his mother what had happened to him. The boy's sobbing quickly turned louder and he eventually walked away, soon followed by his mother. They talked for a bit in their language and then Lisa approached Cesar and his cousin. She explained to them that Thomas was upset because he could not bear the sight of the trapped turtle. She offered to pay them to release it. When Cesar told us the story, he laughed and exclaimed:

I said "No! No! We will release it!" We didn't want any money! The boy was crying for the turtle! I thought: these little *gringos* (whites) do love animals a lot! What else could we do? We untied the turtle and gave it to him because he wanted to set it free himself. He let the turtle free in the forest and watched it walk away.

Cesar told this story repeatedly to family members, neighbours and friends; he and his cousin were quite bewildered by the little boy's distress and any drinking party or other social event was a good occasion to recount the story over and over. Listeners were similarly surprised and amused, and the episode never failed to elicit a great deal of discussion and laughter. During my fieldwork, I often listened to stories by Runa people in which foreigners were described as extremely loving towards animals. It is a shared belief that *caromanda runaguna* ("people from faraway places") express love towards all kinds of animals and cannot bear seeing any harm done to living creatures. Another episode that became a favourite story to be told at social gatherings concerned a French volunteer who had come to spend a few months in Cesar's village. After he had begged his hosts to take him on a hunting expedition, they eventually agreed and he was able to go with them on a three-day trip to a remote hunting site. During the expedition, they encountered a group of howler monkeys and the hunters urged the Frenchman to shoot them. Three monkeys were shot and fell to the ground: two were dead but one had only an injured shoulder. "That is yours", the hunters told the Frenchman, handing him a stick: "Kill it", they said. Upon arrival to the village, the hunters described how the Frenchman, holding the

stick in his hand, had suddenly become pale “like a ghost” (*ayashina*) and had begun to tremble. “His body was shaking; we laughed and said ‘Kill it’, but he kept shaking and did not move, so we waited a bit and then I kill the monkey”, recounted one of the men. The interpretation of the episode – which the Runa found both perplexing and amusing – was once again that “white people” feel a strong compassion towards animals.

Yet, despite their disconcert, the sentiment of compassion which Runa people attribute to white people is not, as I have shown in this chapter, an emotion unknown to them. If it is not the existence of compassion the issue at stake here, what then is the contrast to be drawn between the attitude of the little boy and the Frenchman and those of my Runa friends? I want to suggest that the amazement of my Runa friends was due to the fact that the little boy and the Frenchman manifested compassion for a living being that was completely foreign to them. As I have argued earlier, for the Runa, *llaki* is a state caused by witnessing a condition of helplessness (as in the case of captured animals) or by reciprocal long-term engagements (as in the case of dogs). From a Runa perspective, the question would then be: how could a young boy feel such a pity for an animal he had never seen before?

Reframed as such, the problem poses some interesting interrogatives. One of them is the question of how one develops compassion towards entities that are not “known” directly but rather “imagined” through other means. The little Finnish boy did not know “personally” the turtle: he did not have any long-term relationship or commitment to the animal: he certainly perceived it as an “other” subjectivity but, as I have argued earlier, acknowledging that the other has a mind does not necessarily lead to feeling compassion for him. My Runa friends, very much like the young boy, could witness the turtle’s distress (and perhaps could do so even better since they are very familiar with turtles), and yet they found the boy’s reaction surprising. As they so eloquently put it, how could he feel such intense compassion towards a “random” (*yanga*) turtle, an animal he had never even seen before? I believe that this question is deeply related to the ways in which animals are imagined among Euro-American middle classes.

Ecologist Stephen Kellert (2005) has named “vicarious” or symbolic experiences of nature those encounters with natural kinds which do not come from direct experience but are rather the result of learning through representations, either realistic or unrealistic, of animals and plants. Such vicarious experiences – which usually take place through reading, story-telling or watching TV – comprise a great deal of what children (and adults) living in urban environments in industrialised countries know about animals. The omnipresence of animals in children’s books and toys is a very recent phenomenon: John Berger (1980) argued that the kinds of animal representations which so ubiquitously characterise our daily life – such as toys, drawings, and comics – came about exactly at a time in nineteenth-century Western history in which urban centres were expanding, wild animals were disappearing and domestic pets and zoos were becoming increasingly popular.

One only needs to go to any bookshop and pick a random book to get a sense of the pervasiveness of animals in the media. For instance, Kellert (2005) found that a strikingly high proportion of toddlers' books in English include images of animals and plants which are portrayed in highly anthropomorphic terms. In her ethnography of a preschool in an upper-class New York neighbourhood, anthropologist Adrie Kusserow (2004) writes how empathy – or more aptly, “sympathy” – towards all kinds of living beings is actively taught to children through the use of picture books or toys. For instance, she notices how in preschool books “trees, animals, ducks, rocks and flowers all have feelings, and nothing is too strange to identify with” (Kusserow (2004, p. 187). Whereas not all the stories intentionally aim to convey information about the animals per se – but rather deploy animals to talk about purely human dilemmas – many of them inadvertently suggest a similarity between the inner lives of humans and nonhumans. She also gives other examples of how animals are used to encourage perspective-taking: for instance, during a class, “children sitting in a circle are asked to imagine how they think a bunny rabbit would feel when he loses his best friend or is lost in the field” (Kusserow (2004, p. 185). While the game's purpose might not be that of teaching something about rabbits, the fact that it is used to encourage reflection about human interior states implicitly encourages children to draw a connection between the emotional lives of humans and rabbits.

The question of what effects vicarious representations of animals have on children's conceptualisation of human–nonhuman relationships has been recently the subject of research of a team of psychologists which included Sandra Waxman et al. (2014). They conducted a series of experiments with U.S. 5-year-old children who had been pre-exposed to reading two different books about bears, one in which bears were portrayed in anthropomorphic terms (e.g. wearing hats) and other where bears were presented as animals with specific habits and behaviours. The results were striking: those children who read the book in which bears acted like humans showed a consistent anthropocentric pattern in the following experiments. In other words, after being primed to see bears as possessing human-like qualities, children adopted a human-centred reasoning pattern in the remaining part of the test, whereby humans served as the prototype for thinking about other living creatures. These results seem to suggest that even indirect means of experiencing nonhumans – such as storybooks – can have a measurable effect on the way children come to think about animals. It might then be reasonable to assume that the plethora of vicarious experiences of animals in industrialised Western countries – where nonhumans are understood as sharing similar interior states to us – has consequences in the way we come to empathise with them.

## **Conclusion**

In an essay comparing “Western” and Amazonian ideas about human–nonhuman relationships, anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro

(2012[1998]) argued that whereas for the former, difference is postulated around the belief of a physical continuity and a metaphysical discontinuity (e.g. common DNA but different minds), for the latter, what is common to both humans and animals is not shared biology but rather a condition of “subjectivity” (see also Kohn 2013). Among indigenous Amazonian people, animals – like humans – are persons with desires, intentions and intelligence. This, however, does not mean that animals and humans share the same intentions, desires and wills. As we have seen in this chapter, Runa people are extremely aware of each species’ distinctive needs and desires, and frame such intentions within the specificity of the animal in question. The similarity to which the Runa refer when they speak about animals and humans, then, rests upon the acknowledgment that each species – humans included – possesses certain capacities that allow them to successfully interact with others in their – so to speak – “ecological niche” (Fuentes 2017). It is this kind of “ecological” difference that shapes each species’ capacity to act, feel and think. Through this ecological sensibility, Runa people perceive animals as simultaneously similar to and different from humans: they might then emphasise certain aspects of animal subjectivity which are culturally salient for them – as, for instance, the case of angry goats – and yet they would explain such anger *from a goat’s perspective*, so to speak, rather than merely imputing a human anger (motivated by human interests) onto animals.<sup>3</sup>

In the same essay mentioned earlier, Viveiros de Castro argues that Westerners think to share a physical substratum with animals (as, for instance, in DNA and biology) and to be different from them by virtue of the uniqueness of the human mind (the “abyss” to which Valeri referred). While this is true, biological closeness is not the only way Westerners recognise a similarity with nonhumans. Importantly, as I have argued earlier, for many middle-class urban people in Western countries, animals are often represented as beings which are emotionally similar to us. Animals of which we know relatively little – and which we might only ever see in zoos or on TV – are routinely imputed through film, cartoons, books and picture books with a set of emotions modelled after human ones. This *imagined* emotional closeness – often pejoratively labelled as “anthropomorphic” – seems to me to be at the core of the behaviour of the little boy and the Frenchman who so closely identified with the turtle and the wounded monkey, respectively, as to become paralysed when facing their pain. For the Runa, witnessing an animal in pain is not enough to justify such compassionate reaction: to them animals, let us not forget, are first and foremost conceived as “meat”, *aycha*. The process of imagining an animal as emotionally similar to us, together with the fact that animals in industrial societies are hardly ever presented as food, encourages the kind of empathic manifestations we have witnessed in the case of the boy and the Frenchman. For the Runa, while animal interior states might be similar to humans, these are nevertheless shaped by their distinctive ecology; humans and animals are thus alike and yet profoundly

different. It is only by virtue of this difference that they can be killed or eaten – were they just to be the same as humans, each act of killing would cause profound moral challenges (see Fausto 2007). This is true of many Westerners, too; however, as I argued here, difference and similarity between humans and nonhumans are diversely distributed in the Amazonian and the Euro-American cultural contexts. Animals’ inner states seem to be readily comprehensible to the Runa, but are not necessarily shared; animals can be empathised with, but they are not the indiscriminate recipients of human love.

## Notes

- 1 I am well aware there is a growing body of anthropological research which questions the idea of a monolithic Western modernist attitude to nature and nonhumans (Candea and Alcayna-Stevens 2012; Candea 2012; Milton 2005), and that, as such, my category of the “West” is here to be understood as a generalisation based mainly on (psychological) research done with highly educated urban white people.
- 2 Other practices undertaken by the Runa testify to this understanding: Kohn (2007) reports that among the Avila Runa in the nearby region of Napo, dogs are given concoctions of medicinal plants and are verbally counselled to make them hard-working and well-behaved. In the region where I work, for instance, dogs are given red hot chili pepper to eat in order to cultivate their anger (*piña*) and make them become better hunters.
- 3 My Runa friend’s question about the possibility for goats to get angry also elicits another reflection: why could we not take that possibility into serious consideration? Why should be anger a uniquely human emotional characteristic? These questions really tap into another unspoken assumption that underpins discussions about anthropomorphism. As Webb and colleagues put it, fears about projecting human states onto nonhuman others rely on the basic assumption that “we know both what it means to be characteristically *human* and that the subject lacks that prototypical characteristic” (Webb et al., this volume, emphasis in original). However, such assumption is deeply questionable.

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# 11 Un-tabooing empathy

## The benefits of empathic science with nonhuman research participants

*Christine Webb, Becca Franks, Monica Gagliano and Barbara Smuts*

*Believe in the simple magic of life, in service in the universe, and it will dawn on you what this waiting, peering, 'stretching of the neck' of the creature means. Every word must falsify; but look, these beings live around you, and no matter which one you approach you always reach Being.*

(Buber 1996, p. 29)

### Overview

Conventional scientific training instructs researchers to avoid empathy with their study subjects in the service of maintaining “objectivity” and warding off “anthropomorphism.” This approach creates an artificial gulf between human and nonhuman worlds, and renders nonhuman beings as radical others without minds or at best, as beings with minds that cannot be known or accessed. Here we reconsider the wisdom and utility of this convention in the context of research with other animals, our own field of expertise. Our analysis reveals that contrary to governing assumptions in modern scientific practice, suppressing empathy for other living beings does not inevitably make us more objective. Quite the contrary: it can, instead, introduce its own forms of bias into how we think and work as scientists and thus into the research we produce. These observations not only raise serious scientific concerns, but ethical ones as well. We explore what empathy can do in practice to strengthen science, promote more ethical relationships with other species, and inform policy that protects animal interests.

### The empathy taboo

How can we know the mind of another being? What if that being is not a human being, but a baboon, dog, or goldfish being? While such questions are undoubtedly ancient, they are perhaps more pressing today than ever. In an era of climate crisis, mass extinction, and industrialized animal agriculture, one has to wonder: where have we gone wrong in understanding the minds – and, by extension, the interests – of others we perceive as radically different from ourselves?

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This interdisciplinary volume (Mezzenzana and Peluso) aims to expand ideas about the range of others to whom one can relate through *empathy* – the basic capacity to experience the mindedness of others. Here we consider this timely issue in the context of relationships between scientists and their subjects in animal behaviour research, our own field of study. However, any researcher interested in understanding the mentality of her subjects may find that this chapter contains relevant insights.

Following the phenomenological tradition, we define empathy in this chapter as the fundamental perception of others as minded subjects (Zahavi 2001, see also both Ferguson and Wimmer; Throop, this volume). This definition contrasts with those emphasizing empathy as a cognitive or affective *ability* (e.g., perspective-taking or emotional contagion). Instead, here we consider empathy as a *process* that begins with a general orientation that tunes the observer to recognize the embodied mind of another. This orientation does not rely on verified shared representations or experiences, though it does encourage the observer to seek lines of inquiry into and evidence for alignment and/or divergence in perspective. Importantly, therefore, in our use of the term, empathy does not entail projecting one's own qualities onto others, but offers a *channel* through which one may perceive both similarities and differences between the self and others, especially as they relate to subjective experience (see also Mezzenzana, this volume).

In recognizing and prioritizing the mindedness of others, empathy applied to other animals stands in stark contrast to a central prohibition in modern science (and arguably modern culture): “anthropomorphism.” Technically, anthropomorphism means the projection of human characteristics on to nonhuman entities. Hidden within this original definition are two important assumptions: first, that for something (e.g., an act, observation, argument, or interpretation) to be anthropomorphic in the technical sense, it requires that we first know what it means to be characteristically human; and second, that the target does not have that prototypically human characteristic, i.e., that the projection is just that – an imposition of an outside quality onto an entity that entirely lacks that quality. Both conditions must be met for the label of anthropomorphism to be appropriately applied. For example, it is anthropomorphic to dress a bear in overalls and train her to ride a tricycle: wearing overalls and riding tricycles are clearly human *and not* bear characteristics. In contrast, it is not anthropomorphic to claim that an octopus has an immune system: both humans and octopuses have immune systems, even though they are built from different biological substrates. Often, however, it is only in extreme cases that we have enough information on either front (what it means to be distinctively human and what is certainly characteristic/uncharacteristic of another species) to make an accurate determination of anthropomorphism.

Modern use of the term, however, has strayed far from its original meaning, such that accusations of “anthropomorphism” are often deployed as shorthand for any form of discussing, considering, investigating, or reasoning

about the subjective states (e.g., feelings, thoughts, desires) of nonhuman animals. This slippage has created considerable confusion. Specifically, the charge of anthropomorphism could be brought for the following two very different reasons. Is the criticism founded on the *belief* that the animal subject is totally mindless, i.e., lacking in all subjectivity, thus making any discussion of her mental state pure projection? Or is the criticism that the speculated content of the subjective experience may be incorrect, stemming from human-centric biases: e.g., mistaking a monkey's teeth-baring expression (which resembles a human smile) as an indication of happiness rather than the fearful signal it actually is?

Importantly, most animal behaviour scientists now agree that at least some nonhuman animals possess a variety of subjective states, though the evidence for some taxa is more abundant than it is for others. As such, hypothesizing about and reasoning through data regarding the nature of a particular subjective experience of a nonhuman animal is not necessarily anthropomorphic because most agree that the animal in question in principle has her own mind. For clarity, therefore, we dismiss the less precise, colloquial use of the word that discourages any consideration of animal subjectivity because this chapter focuses on animal subjectivity as a valid topic for scientific investigation and empathy as a valid methodology and conduit for taking it more seriously.

Nonetheless, in the dominant scientific culture,<sup>1</sup> empathy is thought to be at odds with being a careful scientist (Andrews 2020; Gluck 2016; Webb et al. 2019). In our own scientific field, empathy is a veritable *taboo* in the senses that:

1. There is a social custom that prohibits or restricts scientists from engaging in the practice of empathy;
2. Acknowledging this custom forms a fundamental part of our identity as scientists in the context of other disciplines;
3. Disregarding this taboo is generally considered a deviant act that is implicitly discouraged and often punished by the scientific community.

The empathy taboo in science raises a number of serious ethical and scientific concerns. The former have been elucidated by decades of animal welfare and rights scholarship and activism, which have long exposed the unethical treatment of animals in industries like science (see Armstrong and Botzler 2017). However, the scientific concerns raised by the empathy taboo – i.e., how the absence of empathy in science is detrimental to the discipline itself – have received relatively less recognition, especially among scientists and the wider public.<sup>2</sup> We first touch on several key sources of the empathy taboo in science. We then demonstrate how, counter to the assumptions behind this taboo, greater empathy with other animals can promote – rather than undermine – the science. We finally discuss how empathic science fosters

ethical relationships across supposed lines of radical alterity, and informs practical decision-making to identify and protect animal interests.

### Sources of the “empathy taboo” in science

[T]he experimenter is primarily a human trained to lose his natural sensitivity vis-à-vis other animals. He is conditioned (sometimes very harshly, for that matter) to only see in the animal a machine and not to detect in it the slightest trace of subjective life.

(Lestel 2010, p. 151, trans. Chrulew 2014)

#### *Empathy is thought to be human-unique*

The taboo against empathy in science has a long and convoluted history that originates in part from human-centric assumptions about other animals' minds. For centuries, Western religious and secular philosophies maintained that human minds are singular, and that the mental worlds of other species are inferior or altogether absent (Challenger 2021; Crist 2013; Jensen 2016). Positivist and behaviourist notions further put those worlds “off-limits” to rigorous and respectable scientific inquiry (Fraser 2009; Rollin 2000). If the potential target of empathy is assumed to lack a mind or have a mind that remains wholly inaccessible, then experiencing that mind through empathy becomes (quite literally) unthinkable.

The supposed absence or inaccessibility of other animals' minds thus restricts empathy to an ability that only humans possess or to a process that can only occur between human beings. Most theory and research on empathy reflects this human-centric supposition. But humans are not the only species who can empathize – indeed, studies suggest that the capacity for empathy is widespread throughout the animal kingdom (see de Waal and Preston 2017; Pérez-Manrique and Gomila 2018 for recent reviews). Despite this, empathy *between* humans and other animals is habitually omitted from theoretical and empirical models for empathy, which are largely (if not totally) restricted to conspecific interactions. For instance, we are aware of no overarching proximate or ultimate evolutionary framework for empathy that accounts directly for encounters between members of *different* species. The absence of such models may have further prohibited careful consideration of the possibility (and utility) of cross-species empathy in scientific fields like ethology and beyond.

#### *Empathy is considered a threat to objectivity*

Assuming that other animals have minds to which scientists can relate through empathy, such a practice is typically seen as a threat to objectivity in the governing culture of science (this is also the case in other disciplines such as

developmental psychology, where the minds of human infants are often deemed unknowable: see Reddy, this volume). This notably contrasts with many human research contexts – e.g., ethnographic fieldwork – where empathic relationships with subjects are considered essential to the science (Throop and Zahavi 2020; Wels 2013). When it comes to animal research, several sets of concerns are habitually raised. These include *methodological concerns* over empathy interfering with the subject’s “natural” state and thereby compromising scientific rigour (e.g., Kennedy 1992). Scientists are conventionally trained to impartially observe their study systems “from the outside,” which demands distance and detachment (Rosner 1994). There are also *interpretational concerns*, which frequently centre on the perceived dangers of “anthropomorphism” and accordingly empathy as a bias that scientists must overcome (e.g., Kennedy 1992; Wynne 2004). Under this rendering, empathy occurs when observers automatically and unquestioningly map their own internal state onto a target. As previously discussed, however, there is an important distinction between the error of projecting a mind onto a mindless object versus taking an interest in the mind of a nonhuman animal – an act that may involve mistakes in labelling the nature or quality of subjective states, but is not necessarily mistaken in the presumption that subjective states are present.

Cognitive ethology – the study of the mental experiences of other animals under natural conditions – arose at the turn of the 21st century as an antidote to what Donald Griffin (1998) called “mentophobia” – the taboo against genuine scientific consideration of private, conscious mental experiences. And yet, many scientists remain reluctant to fully embrace its premises (Allen 2004). Eileen Crist (1999) has shown how this hesitation gets reflected in dominant linguistic conventions of ethology and socioecology, which project automaticity onto animals’ behaviour and downplay the significance of their mental experiences. Scientists commonly portray other species as passive vehicles of their genes and environments rather than as individuals who actively shape their own lives – as beings with agency and complex emotions, motives, thoughts, interests, or personalities. This perspective is exemplified by the common usage of brackets and scare quotes around words that imbue other animals with any kind of subjective life, and criticism of scientists who do otherwise. To use a highly-referenced example, scientific journals rejected some early papers by Jane Goodall because she used chimpanzee names (rather than numeric codes), gender pronouns (instead of the conventional “it”), and words like “culture” to describe their communities. Although her findings were eventually recognized as groundbreaking scientific contributions, initially her observations of these qualities were deemed by the scientific establishment to be unscientific, “anthropomorphic,” and even sentimental.

### *Scientific training exorcises empathic concern*

Many people may be unaware of the empathy taboo in science, including scientists themselves.



Taboos can be explicitly taught, but they can also be learned implicitly via other values in the dominant culture. Likewise, researchers may internalize the empathy taboo, rarely discussing it openly with the scientific community, let alone the general public. One of the dominant values governing today's scientific culture is that it is permissible and even necessary to harm or kill other animals in the name of science. Performing these invasive procedures requires scientists to blunt empathic connection with the animals they study, a desensitization process that begins early (Ellis and Irvine 2010; Solot and Arluke 1997) and extends through one's graduate scientific training (Arluke 1994; Capaldo 2004; Lynch 1988; Thomas 2013).<sup>3</sup> Scientists themselves occasionally write about this experience (e.g., Avila-Villegas 2018; Gagliano 2018; Gluck 2016).

As one (former) behavioural scientist summarizes:

[T]hose attracted to a career involving research on animals must undergo an emotional and ethical retraining process every bit as important as their scientific training. . . . I grew up with deep emotional attachments to family pets, believed without question that animals had internal lives that mattered to them and were capable of feeling joy, sadness, fear, disappointment, and pain, and was revolted by cruelty to animals. . . . By the time I had finished my undergraduate education and started graduate school, my professors – and the overall research context into which I threw myself – had exorcised my sentimental concern for animals' welfare and constructed for me a new belief system in which there was really no such thing as the animals' perspective.

(Gluck 2016, pp. 13–14)

As Gluck's trenchant testimony reveals, the empathy taboo in science can result in the erasure of animal subjectivity (see also Reddy, this volume, for a similar process in developmental psychology). This is clearly problematic from an ethical point of view. But as we shall see next, it also raises serious scientific concerns.

### **Why an empathic science is a better science**

Knowledge of the other can arise only in relation to the other.

(Fogel et al. 2003, p. 624)

It would be ideal here to systematically compare results from two types of ethological studies: those predicated on empathy between scientists and their subjects, and those that attempted to avoid it.<sup>4</sup> Yet the governing scientific culture acts as a gatekeeper such that the work of such scientists typically does not make it to publication, or the empathic connection itself does not feature therein.

Instead of these desirable but unavailable side-by-side comparisons (but see: Despret 2010), here we explore how a scientific approach grounded in empathy might unfold. Because empathy takes animal subjectivity seriously, it is a necessary (though not necessarily sufficient) condition for recognizing their interests and points of view. In all basic elements of scientific research – conceptualization, execution, and interpretation – this recognition is fundamental to the science.

### *Conceptualization*

Science is never value-free, and this matters in practice. The values that scientists hold about other animals cause them to focus on certain problems to the exclusion of others. For instance, lingering behaviourist and positivist notions that the internal workings of animal minds are a “black box” shape the questions and hypotheses that scientists pursue. Empathy could help bring animal subjective experiences into the realm of investigative inquiry, widening scientists’ scope and uncovering alternative or additional explanations for phenomena of interest (see Burghardt 1997). One issue concerns what we decide to study in the first place. For example, when observing wild baboons, one of us (BS) noticed a female baboon hiding while her whole body shook after being attacked by an adult male. This led BS to imagine how she would feel if a male twice her size with razor-sharp teeth attacked her. As a result, BS began studying sexual coercion in nonhuman animals, helping to initiate a new focus in ethological research on this topic (Muller and Wrangham 2009; Smuts and Smuts 1993).

As another example, empathy could encourage ethologists – who are conventionally trained to focus on the ultimate/adaptive value of behaviour – to consider testing proximate explanations, such as the animal’s corresponding emotions, thoughts, and motives (Webb et al. 2019). For instance, when observing chimpanzees, one of us (CW) noticed that some individuals intervened when their closest partner became friends with an immigrant group member. Clearly, this behaviour could affect fitness by protecting valuable social relationships from potential interlopers (an ultimate explanation). But by recognizing chimpanzees as minded subjects, empathy allowed CW to hypothesize about underlying emotional states like jealousy (a proximate explanation) and test predictions accordingly (Webb et al. 2020). Behaviour apparently intended to disrupt a close associate’s social interactions with a potential competitor is present in other species/taxa, as well (e.g., Massen et al. 2014; Mielke et al. 2017; Schneider and Krueger 2012).

Empathy with other animals may also help scientists rethink the burden of proof when developing hypotheses. Traditionally, the null hypothesis reflects what is expected to be the norm, against which scientists test for statistically significant discrepancies. In most scientific research on animal cognition and emotion, the null hypothesis reflects a sceptical stance towards animal mentality, positing that the animal lacks rich affective or cognitive

processes. In light of ever-growing evidence for animal emotional and cognitive complexity (not to mention Darwinian notions of mental continuity between species),<sup>5</sup> philosophers have raised important criticisms of this convention (Andrews and Huss 2014; Mikhalevich 2015). As they convincingly demonstrate, there are no strong scientific or epistemic reasons to choose the sceptical hypothesis as the null hypothesis when it comes to animal minds.<sup>6</sup>

## *Execution*

### *Appreciating the animal's perspective*

Seeing other animals as minded beings can facilitate a richer appreciation for how they might perceive, interpret, and act in research situations, yielding methodologies that account for their unique subjectivity. This can promote better study designs that boost the internal and external validity of research (Bräuer et al. 2020; Despret 2015; Sueur et al. 2021; Webb et al. 2019). Though the importance of this has been acknowledged at least since Jakob von Uexküll's (1985[1909]) influential Umwelt concept, much comparative cognition research relies on human-centric sensory abilities and tasks that have low ecological validity for other animals (such as the use of computer touchscreens and human pointing gestures). Tellingly, despite widespread acceptance of the significance of smell to dogs, olfaction is typically not controlled for in canine cognition research (Horowitz and Franks 2020).

### *Promoting animal welfare*

When researchers engage with animal subjectivity, they encounter animals as agents with their own interests, allowing them to envision stronger theoretical and empirical models that safeguard the animals' well-being (Franks 2019; Gruen 2015; Van Patter and Blattner 2020). Compassionate conservation is one such example (e.g., Batavia et al. 2021; Bekoff 2013; Wallach et al. 2018), but criticisms of this approach exemplify its overall conflict with dominant scientific values (e.g., Griffin et al. 2020; Hayward et al. 2019; Johnson et al. 2019; Oommen et al. 2019).

Good animal welfare is undoubtedly linked to the quality of research data. Empathic regard for other animals can enrich scientific understanding of the impact of the environments in which they live. Generally speaking, captive experimentation is thought to enable control over potentially confounding factors, as reflected in the pronounced imbalance of these (versus wild) environments to understand animal cognition (Boesch 2007; Janmaat 2019; Morand-Ferron et al. 2016). However, there is increasing recognition that laboratory conditions are highly uncharacteristic of the dynamic wild environments in which animals have evolved, yielding poor scientific reproducibility (Garner et al. 2017; Richter et al. 2009). This produces a vicious cycle in practice. By putting animals into environments and experimental

situations completely devoid of meaning for them, we effectively degrade them to the status of mere objects, and then study them as such (from Chrulew 2014). A large body of literature has shown that when animals are treated like machines – i.e., housed in barren, monotonous environments and subjected to unavoidable manipulations – they lose their agency (e.g., learned helplessness), cognitive potential, and emotional capacities (anhedonia). Like a self-fulfilling prophecy, what we can learn from other animals thus depends on whether we first approach them, via empathy, as minded subjects (Despret 2010; Jamieson 1998).

### *Foregrounding human–animal relationships*

As one example, scientists who work with wild primates are conventionally trained to ignore them, to neutralize any effect human observers might have on their behaviour. Yet as one of us [BS] discovered during her fieldwork with baboons in East Africa, ignoring the baboons was not a neutral act, because she was not a neutral object in their environment (Figure 11.1). The baboons treated her as a social being, which meant that in some contexts, she had to treat them as social beings in return. This empathic dynamic helped baboons relax in her presence (and vice versa), enriching her observations and providing a unique window into animal (inter)subjectivity



*Figure 11.1* BS among several of the baboons she did research with in Gilgil, Kenya.

(Smuts 2001, 2008). For social animals like primates, relationships are the default state, and learned disengagement on the part of scientists can inadvertently generate noise and abnormal behaviours rather than reduce them (Midgley 2001; see also Reddy [in this volume] for a relevant discussion of “detachment itself as participatory” in the context of scientific research in psychology more generally).<sup>7</sup>

Although dominant conventions require disengagement on the part of scientists from the animals with whom they work, scholars from other fields recognize the importance (and inherence) of this relationship to knowledge production.<sup>8</sup> For instance, observing ongoing relationships between scientists and the beings they study led philosophical ethologist<sup>9</sup> Vinciane Despret to write that what constitutes the differences between scientists who give other animals a chance to be interesting and intelligent and the ones who do not

lay in the very fact that the first ones are aware that their animals respond to them and they respond back to these responses: in doing so, they made their subjects more *responsive*, which is one of the most reliable ways of becoming intelligent. And they do this with care and curiosity, which are the conditions of good knowledge.

(Despret 2010, p. 3)

As this rich body of scholarship has shown, when we remove artificial subject–object distinctions in science and take relationality more seriously, we come to see animals as participants in the co-creation of knowledge (Cajete 2000).

### *Interpretation*

Viewing animals as co-creators of knowledge will lead to many accusations of “anthropomorphism,” which, as we have discussed, is in many circles tantamount to labelling the science “wrong.” This is why the distinction between saying “that animal has no possibility of subjective experience” and “the content of that subjective experience may be incorrect” is so important.

This distinction may appear subtle, but it can make a world of difference to how science is conducted and interpreted by others. Several scientists have advocated for what they describe as an *animal*-centric or *critical* anthropomorphism, a process they define as beginning with grounding interpretations of animal behaviour in inferences about what humans would experience in similar situations and complimenting this starting place with careful replication and consideration of species-typical biology, environments, and sensory abilities (e.g., Bekoff 2000; Burghardt 2007; de Waal 1999). To the extent that empathy opens possibilities for this more reflective form of incorporating nonhuman subjectivity into science, it can help



researchers avoid the pitfalls of denying animals' subjectivity outright and inappropriately imposing machine-like qualities onto them (mechanomorphism; Crist 1999).

Engaging with animals as subjects through empathy can also encourage scientists to use animating language that enriches rather than undermines their science, i.e., when subjective interpretations are indeed warranted. For instance, one of us [BS] used the word "friendship" to describe baboon social relationships, a characterization that enabled her to analyse and understand their behaviour in new ways (Smuts 1985); the word friendship is now commonly used in animal research without the need to put it in scare quotes.

Despite fears that it biases the interpretation of data, an empathic regard for other animals can facilitate more nuanced, holistic accounts of animal behaviour. In scientific fields like ethology, different levels of analysis – such as Tinbergen's (1963) four aims to elucidate a given behaviour's development, causation, phylogeny, and function – are treated as *complementary* explanations for animal behaviour. Private experiences (as Burghardt pointed out in 1997) are an important, complementary dimension to these other explanations that can (together) contribute to a more well-rounded scientific interpretation of the behaviour. This fifth aim acknowledges that other animals may experience events in ways that we have difficulty sharing and describing, yet as Burghardt reminds us: "[s]cience is best conceived as a process for gaining improved understanding, a search for truth without any hope that we will ever fully attain it" (Burghardt 1997, p. 267), and in this sense, interpretations concerning another's subjectivity are not inherently inimical to the scientific endeavour.

Though we appropriately question the extent to which empathy affords accurate interpretations of others' minds, phenomenologists (including Husserl, Stein, Merleau-Ponty; reviewed in Zahavi 2001) have long considered empathy as a direct and immediate way of knowing. In this view, the empathic knowledge that arises when encountering animal minds is more certain than conventionally supposed, which ameliorates concerns about mistaken mental inference or projection (Aaltola 2013). The opposing view is that we are confined to our own internal states and unable to access those of others, which certainly (and especially) includes the mental worlds of other species, a question famously addressed in Nagel's (1974) essay titled "What is it like to be a bat?". However, as Zahavi (2001) and other phenomenological accounts of empathy posit, internal states themselves are embodied, not hidden from our view (a notable departure from Cartesian notions of mind–body dualism). To the extent that subjective experiences manifest in our outward behaviours, empathy provides a channel to knowledge of the mental worlds of others (including animals). Particularly in light of the empathy taboo, animal behaviour scientists would benefit greatly from engagement with these ongoing and formative philosophical discussions (Webb et al. 2019).



## Conclusion

“I” has to be passive. Attention alone – that attention which is so full that the “I” disappears – is required of me. I have to deprive all that I call “I” of the light of my attention and turn it on to that which cannot be conceived.

(Weil 2002, p. 118)

The empathy taboo that pervades the dominant culture of animal behaviour science originates in reasonable and good intentions to maintain the validity and reliability of science itself. We wholly endorse this mission. However, here we have explored how empathy can yield a better science – one that takes animals’ mental lives seriously. At all stages of the research process, this stance can help counteract longstanding scientific trends to deny or downplay the significance of animal mentality that may (often inadvertently) bias the research while purporting to be objective. Thus, the concerns that underlie the empathy taboo are, paradoxically, the very concerns that greater acceptance of empathy may help resolve.

In addition to these scientific considerations, the minds of others have profound ethical and practical significance. Research has shown that we grant others moral consideration based on the extent to which their minds exhibit features like sentience and intellect (Gray et al. 2007). Evidence for these attributes in other animals – i.e., belief in animal mind (Hills 1995; Knight et al. 2004) – has raised urgent moral concerns, as reflected in the rapid rise of political and legal frameworks to protect animal interests (e.g., Armstrong and Botzler 2017; Deckha 2021; Donaldson and Kymlicka 2011; Meijer 2019; Wise 2000). Inevitably, courts will increasingly call on human experts to determine what those interests are. Among many who could reasonably be considered experts, scientists are conventionally seen as the authorities. But while scientists of animal behaviour generate relevant evidence, they often disengage from the ethical debates that ensue (Webb et al. 2019). As such, they may feel unprepared to represent the interests of their study systems (Huchard 2019) or remain confined to scientific practices that themselves are ill-suited to understanding those interests (Franks et al. 2020). Here we have shown how greater consideration of empathy in science may help remedy some of these shortcomings.

Our chapter has focused on when and how empathy is useful, which is not to say that it is invariably accurate or sufficient. How can scientists avoid projecting onto other animals characteristics that merely suit and satisfy human interests and assumptions? Experiences with other animals are filtered through our own values and expectations of the world, which may be especially relevant to science, where researchers often proactively set out to test predetermined hypotheses. Simone Weil’s (2002) notion of “attention” provides one antidote because it requires a kind of attunement with the surrounding world that does not entail misleading preconceptions

(see Aaltola 2013 for a review). In a state of attention, we let go of all efforts to decode the animal's behaviour and instead allow the animal's own way of being to surface. What results is a diminishing of the self, helping to avoid self-serving and self-focused conceptualizations of who animals are.<sup>10</sup> It affords a perspective on the animal that allows for both similarity and difference, a simultaneous sense of proximity and alterity, of what has been called "liminal intimacy, or intimacy at a distance, for which closeness lies not in possessing or bringing near, nor in knowing as such, but instead in a relational being-with-otherness that is comfortable with degrees of unknowing" (Nimmo 2016, p. 26). Here it is moreover important to acknowledge that relating to others through empathy does not necessarily mean forging an intimate affiliative relationship. Recognizing and respecting animals' autonomy and mindedness may just as often mean letting them be (Bradshaw et al. 2010; Candea 2010; De Jaegher 2019; Nimmo 2016).

As mentioned at the outset of the chapter, empathy research conventionally focuses on human-to-human interactions. Even when scholarship on empathy accounts for interspecies encounters, it always seems to involve human empathy with a nonhuman other. We have fallen into a similar pattern here by focusing on relationships between humans (scientists) and other animals, a narrow picture of the empathic relations that surely abound in and connect the living world. For practical reasons, we have also limited our discussion to human-animal interactions, but note that similar conversations are unfolding with the minds of plants (e.g., Ryan et al. 2021). Given the radical alterity of vegetal life, some question the possibility of empathy with plants (e.g., Marder 2012). However, it is important to ask: if empathy is a stance that enables the recognition of both similarity *and* difference between the self and others, what are the boundaries of that recognition? To return to a previous point, two overlooked assumptions are embedded within the original definition of anthropomorphism – namely that we know both what it means to be characteristically *human* and that the subject lacks that prototypical characteristic. Analogous assumptions may also apply in the case of hypotheses pertaining to the limits of empathy. Are we confident enough in our estimations about what makes a prototypically human self so different from another being who supposedly lacks that defining feature? Do we have enough information on either front to claim insuperable barriers? Fortunately, these are the areas of inquiry that greater integration between science and empathy will invite, beckoning us to *un-taboo* empathy within the relevant scientific fields and beyond.

## Notes

- 1 Throughout this chapter, we intentionally refer to the dominant or governing scientific culture to denote the customs and values disproportionately dictating what gets published, funded, and otherwise rewarded under the broader rubric of "science." This is not to say that science is one coherent monolith. Rather,

- here we endeavour to show that there are many different ways of doing science, and those ways have different consequences for what we learn.
- 2 As we highlight later in the chapter, this is not to ignore decades of work in the history and philosophy of science, and especially feminist theories of animal care, embodiment, and relationality, which have taken empathy seriously as a way of knowing and explored its corresponding implications for science.
  - 3 This is especially noteworthy in light of the fact that many researchers (present authors included) pursue a scientific track in the first place because of the empathy they experience with other species.
  - 4 With “attempted” here being the operative word. Philosophers have long emphasized the automaticity of the empathy response, an idea to which recent scientific findings lend further support (de Waal and Preston 2017; McAuliffe et al. 2019).
  - 5 Darwin posited that all living beings who evolved via natural selection exhibit continuity in both “corporeal and mental endowments” (Darwin 1859, p. 489).
  - 6 Practically speaking, setting the appropriate burden of proof also has crucial implications for animal ethics and policy (Birch 2017).
  - 7 This illustrates an interplay between the similarities and differences that emerge from empathic regard for the other. To begin with, BS and the baboons experienced an automatic, mutual recognition of their similarity as social subjects, but species’ differences in communication came between them. However, BS’s recognition of similarities between baboon body language and that of humans allowed her to invent ways of relating that the baboons understood. This helped them accept her presence, which enhanced BS’s ability to observe and record intimate aspects of their social relationships not possible from a distance.
  - 8 This includes phenomenologists (see Painter and Lotz 2007), decolonial and Indigenous scholars (see Cajete 2000; Smith 1999; Xiem et al. 2019), and feminist and STS scholars (see Gruen 2015; Haraway 2008; Rosner 1994).
  - 9 Philosophical ethology is an interdisciplinary research field that bridges the natural and social sciences to address questions about animal subjectivity. For a review of its leading figures and ideas, see Bussolini (2013).
  - 10 See Wels (2013) for a relevant discussion and summary of how leaving behind the “self” in exploration of the animal “other” relates to Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) notion of “becoming,” and how “becoming (animal)” offers a way forward in developing empathy as a research methodology.

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## 12 *Augenblick* and the ‘rush’ of extraordinary encounters

### Empathy and sociality with non-human radical others in Amazonia

*Daniela Peluso*

#### Introduction

This chapter examines how and when empathy is experienced by or made relevant for Amazonian Ese Eja when involved in encounters with non-human others.<sup>1</sup> Drawing on a broad range of disciplines – anthropology, philosophy, cognition studies, neuroscience and sports science – I focus on extraordinary moments of empathy that shape ‘the rush’ of exceptional and incendiary instances that emerge from encounters between humans and radical others in communities, forests and dreams. This analysis is grounded in ethnographic research on Ese Eja experiences and attacks by animal predators in a variety of contexts. Given ontological underpinnings of human and non-human shared qualities and differences, and possibilities for intersubjectivity and transformation, this chapter views radical otherness as both radical difference and radical sameness, and examines how empathy arises in the swift transition from the former to the latter. It also seeks to better understand the extent to which empathetic relationships matter in relation to stress-infused physicality and perception. The Aristotelian notion of *Augenblick* (‘the glance of the eye’) as a ‘decisive moment’ (Ward 2016, p. i) and its Heideggerian usage as ‘the moment of vision, which temporalizes itself in a resolution’ (Heidegger 1962, p. 394) are used to elucidate links between empathy and encounters with non-human others in Amazonian cross-realities, dynamic overlapping worlds, to add to our understandings of radical othering. My hope is to contribute to interdisciplinary literatures that view empathy as linked to action and to present an additional layer of perspective-taking through an examination of the Amazonian literature.

#### Empathy and non-human others

Empathy – be it cognitive, affective or somatic – does not exist in isolation from other capacities. It is entangled within and amidst selves and others, and emerges in places and settings and within moments and times that are

particular to people, places and context. In this chapter, I am interested in empathy as a set of relational processes that culminate in incendiary moments that spring a person toward action – even if that action is a person’s silent decision not to act. Starting from the standpoint that empathy is a process (Halpern 2001, 2011) that entails cognitive resonance with and/or the imagining of the feelings of others, I adhere to Jason Throop’s phenomenological definition of empathy as ‘a multimodal process that not only involves perception, intellection, affect, and imagination but also the bodily and sensory aspects of lived experience’ (Throop 2012, p. 408). I have found Throop’s definition to be relevant and helpful for discussing lived empathy.<sup>2</sup> In addition, Throop’s manifesto on empathy (see Throop, this volume) further stresses the asymmetries between self-understanding and the understanding of others in empathetic experiences that reflect the limits on one’s own habitus and empathy itself. In discussing Ese Eja empathetic apprehensive encounters with non-human others, I focus specifically on those happenstance and vulnerable moments in which processes of empathy emerge in the foreground when one comes across a non-human animal that most tensely reflect the prey/predator/ally dynamic relations and possibilities.

All Ese Eja human–animal encounters rest upon belief in an originary state of human/non-human undifferentiation and an understanding of reality as being part of a set of cross-realities with perspectival and animist attributes (see Figure 12.1). Everyday relationships between humans and non-humans are also informed by a critical yet contingent prey/predator/ally triad reflected in their interactions (Peluso 2003a, 2021). The triad reflects a set of possibilities for Ese Eja and animals to shift positions depending on context. For instance, one can hunt an animal, be attacked by an animal or appeal to an animal’s non-visible, intangible dimension of personhood to assist in healing or shamanistic activities. On the other hand, Ese Eja view these positions as potentially reversing and changing in an infinity of directions and contexts and at a moment’s notice. Such interactions shape and are entangled in all aspects of Ese Eja daily perceptions and experiences of their world as it emerges amidst cross-realities, particularly in moments of potential transformation that could entail moving from a human to animal body (and animal subjectivity and sensibilities), something rare but still considered to be possible (Peluso 2004, 2007). Indeed, empathy needs to be understood within such a framework, since empathy, as Throop and Duranti (2015) remind us, is enmeshed in one’s habitual and sensory life.

A radical other must challenge the very idea of selfhood (Leistle 2016). Given Ese Eja understandings of a historical shared undifferentiated ontological core of being between humans and animals, it is important to define what is meant by radical otherness. Radical otherness consists of the ambiguous coming together of radical difference and radical sameness. To begin, othering is a central concept for defining the self; the other stands in contrast to one’s identity or in contrast to that which one’s identity is shaped against (Levinas 1999), and yet at the same time the other is inextricable



Figure 12.1 Times of human-animal undifferentiation: Edósikiana kills two harpy eagles with arrows.

Source: Sydney Acosta Solizunquehua.

from the self (Hegel 1977). Defined this way, othering is an expansive and contracting overlapping mode of conceptualizing and acting upon the world in terms of difference and sameness. Empathy also operates relationally within the ambiguity of othering, emerging amidst one's lived experience and environment in specific though not always predictable contexts. For Ese Eja, otherness creates conceptual and ideological boundaries of identity and provides a guiding framework for everyday relations and behaviour. At the same time, otherness is ambiguous since the other has the potential to move in and out of the self – just as the self has the possibility to move in and out of the other. For instance, if a human is seduced by a non-human animal other, they can potentially transform into an animal, even though at first they encounter each other as discrete, separate and different beings with distinct points of view.

Radical otherness, like empathy, is variably situated and positioned within Ese Eja histories and ontologies and can move back and forth. Since Ese Eja, like most indigenous lowland South Americans (Viveiros de Castro 1998, see Mezzenzana, this volume), view non-human animals as having subjectivity and intentionality, they are never as radically different as they would be in conventional Western contexts – and yet, by virtue of being non-humans, they are radically other despite their sameness.<sup>3</sup> Hence,



in everyday life, non-human animals are animals and are thus radically different . . . until they are not. It is precisely within this everyday lingering potentiality, whereby something suddenly shifts, that radical sameness becomes apparent as it unexpectedly emerges from radical difference. One is then propelled into a precarious context in which a radical other is overlapping with the know-how of the self and poses an existential and physical threat. It is precisely the recognition of such extraordinary moments that is discussed here. As Mezzenzana and Peluso point out “radical otherness is not a static category but one which often fluctuates, even within the same setting” (this volume).

To discuss Ese Eja empathy and radical otherness, I engage with Amazonian ontologies, ethnography and peripatetic and phenomenological philosophy. In considering the phenomenological experience of empathy as it arises in intense encounters with non-human others, I expand my analysis to include cognition, neuroscience and sports sciences, particularly in moments of adrenaline-infused stress. While I do not seek to merge Amazonian and Western ontologies, I use a multi-disciplinary lexicon to communicate specific kinds of instances when Amazonian bodies and spaces align, and empathy emerges as a way of understanding radical others and acting upon such encounters. By bringing together these different understandings of the world, I hope to show that they coincide in ways that render a deeper understanding of how radical others are perceived, imagined and empathized with.

The concept of *Augenblick* – both the original Aristotelian usage as an ethical moment of *kairos* that depicts knowing *when* to do the right thing within ‘a passing instant when an opening appears which must be driven through with force if success is to be achieved’ (White 1987, p. 13); and the Heideggerian usage as ‘the moment of vision, which temporalizes itself in a resolution’ (Heidegger 1962, p. 394) – helps us comprehend empathy in moments of extreme stress or excitement.<sup>4</sup> Throughout this chapter, I argue that where one would expect an Ese Eja individual’s focus to return to the self in such moments of stress, instead the focus turns outwards, towards the world. Furthermore, I argue that this outward-facing possibility occurs with greater likelihood where individuals are socialized to recognize that non-human others are also actively facing them as radical others whose radical sameness suddenly emerges from radical difference.

Like other lowland South American ethnic groups (Viveiros de Castro 1996; Lima 1999; Londoño Sulkin 2017) and North American Indigenous peoples (Brightman 1993; Nadasdy 2007), Ese Eja tell of a time when their ancestors were undifferentiated from animals (Alexiades 1999; Peluso 2003a, 2003b, 2004, 2007, 2021). Furthermore, prior to birth, Ese Eja children are linked with non-human others specifically through the dreams that their parents have and the subsequent names that are bestowed upon them (Peluso and Boster 2002; Peluso 2004, 2007, 2015b). Similarly, Mezzenzana’s research focuses on how indigenous Amazonian children are socialized and attuned to the widespread idea that non-human others have



distinct personhoods and perspectives, and what this means in terms of their childhood (Mezzenzana 2020; see also Mezzenzana, this volume).<sup>5</sup> In focusing on extraordinary encounters with non-humans, my analysis takes for granted that Amazonian ongoing socialization acknowledges that the world consists of what Eduardo Kohn (2013, p. 31) refers to as an 'ecology of selves', a non-anthropocentric reality that places the individual in a continual field of shifting relationships. Notwithstanding, this occurs in varying degrees and is affected by context. In laying these multi-natural relationships as the necessary groundwork for sociality, I recognize socio-historical particularities as key frameworks for contexts in which empathy arises. For this reason, I briefly review Ese Eja ontologies in relation to particular pan-Amazonian ideas to highlight what these might mean in terms of underpinning individual behaviour related to potential moments, captured as *Augenblick*, of empathy.

Ese Eja acts of empathy draw upon indigenous notions of personhood, agency and transformation. This entails paying close attention to the Ese Eja concept of *eshawa*, the invisible, intangible and inalienable aspect of all 'life' (Alexiades 1999; Peluso 2003a, 2004, 2007, 2021). *Eshawa* as personhood, with its ensuing sociality, builds on multi-natural 'perspectivism' (Viveiros de Castro 1992, p. 254, 1998, 2018), whereby intentionality and consciousness form the multiple subjects of humans, animals and non-visible others, and their ability to see each other differently. Concomitantly, multiplicity – the fluidity of human identity and the permeability between different realities – and transformation – the ability to change between various singular and plural forms – are prominent themes in Ese Eja understandings of reality. Striking moments of empathy fully draw on such internalized and practised views and offer unique opportunities to explore the coexistence, 'contradiction' and possibilities of transgression between cross-realities.

Here it is also important to note that individuals and groups are acknowledged as being responsible for participating in the crafting of others, and that this too rests upon a conglomerate of several other pan-Amazonian ideas: that bodies are socially fabricated, the consubstantiality of bodies, ideals of conviviality and well-being, an acceptance that humans derive from an originary state of human/non-human undifferentiation, an understanding of reality as being part of a set of cross-realities with perspectival and animist attributes, and that interactions with 'others' are an ongoing process of relatedness.<sup>6</sup> Simultaneous and key to all of these social, ontological and metaphysical notions are those of multiplicity and transformation; and finally, all of these ideas come together under a set of practices that require ongoing acts of caring, repetition and reiteration for 'people' to be fashioned as particular types of people. I view empathy as part of these crucial social interactions and its enactment as part of the processes that 'make people'. While focusing on typical interactions makes such an alignment persuasively clear, this chapter instead chooses to focus on extraordinary moments of empathy that entail relationships with non-human radical

others to illustrate how the intertwining of empathy is experienced and acted upon.

In everyday Ese Eja language, *quiaeno* and *quiabame* are used to describe general states of sadness and happiness, respectively. If one wishes to express and mark empathy, then Ese Eja form composite words that join the emotions ‘sadness’ (*quiaeno*) or ‘happiness’ (*quiabame*) together with the verb stem ‘seeing/knowing’ (*eba*) to not only intensify their feeling but to exclaim a deep knowledge of these feelings. These composite lexemes, *quiaenoeba* and *quiabameeba*, reflect the individual emotional intelligence that punctuates and expresses culminated moments of empathy.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, emotional recognition is acknowledged across disciplines as being part of empathy, and it is also widely considered to be a necessary precondition of it (Mar 2011). Ese Eja markedly use these states of happiness and sadness, which cover a diverse range of contexts and states of mind. Thus, a person would say ‘I am sad because I know/see’ (*quiaenoeba*) in moments that strongly entail interpersonal empathy toward others. Similarly, and in parallel, neuroscientists recognize that affective and cognitive empathy need to come together, despite being clinically and neurally distinct from one another, so as to contribute to the ‘normal human empathic experience’ (Cox et al. 2011).

### Unexpected empathetic encounters

The following narratives capture unexpected empathetic encounters between humans and non-human radical others. The analyses are grounded in ethnographic research on Ese Eja experiences and attacks by animal predators in a variety of contexts. The first tells of an encounter in an indigenous community, the second tells of dream encounters and the third is a descriptive summary of hunting tales. All the narratives describe moments entailing a ‘rush’ of bodily sensation, a physiological phenomenon that Western science describes as an adrenaline surge due to a hormonal release of epinephrine into the bloodstream that typically occurs in highly stressful situations.

Not all hunting, killing and dreaming entail empathy akin to the ideas that resonate with perspectivism and animism; empathy is something that at times emerges as significant and at times does not. The following ethnographic accounts illustrate when Ese Eja ontologies shape and culminate in empathetic moments of understanding and/or actions precisely in moments of *Augenblick*, a decisive moment of vision.

#### *Iba*

It was the first shimmering of dawn, and only a few people were up and about in a small Ese Eja community on the Heath River, Peru. Kisaa was blowing on kindling set against some ashy logs to resuscitate the outdoor fire to boil a few plantains. A few individuals from her household were already rustling about. Her 8-year-old stepdaughter Hisha exited the clearing around the

house to urinate when suddenly time stood still. What can be accounted for here – although it could only have happened over a few moments – is spoken about and recaptured as though hours upon hours of moments were strung together. A jaguar (*iba*) emerged from the surrounding forest right behind Kisaa's house and knocked Kisaa to the ground by the fire, but rather than to attack her as Iba would normally be expected to do, Iba instead ran toward little Hisha, pounced upon her and pinned her to the ground. Kisaa's screams rang through the air, and the community sprang into action upon hearing her cries. Each person's account made note of Iba's behaviour – each person spoke with great compassion towards Iba – for they could clearly see that it was Sapanei (Kisaa's deceased mother) returning from the land of the dead in the form of Iba to visit her daughter, a daughter long neglected by Sapanei's former husband (not Hisha's biological father) yet being raised by him and non-relatives. One young man emerged to tempt Iba off the girl; he at first distracted her and then fought her with his hands, getting bitten on the behind in the process. His brother, from a different household, appeared and swiftly shot Iba dead.

It was quite an unusual event, and Ese Eja spent the morning feeling sorry for Iba, making empathetic statements using the word *quienoeba* ('I know/see sadness') to frame their understanding of Iba's arrival, actions and intentions. They also analyzed and understood that Iba had not arrived to bring them harm. Iba's death and the somewhat swift and improvisational manner in which she was killed were seen as acts of care.

### *Naming dreams with non-human others*

Parents and close family members dream the 'true names' (*bajani nei*) of their children, usually several months before they are born (Peluso 2003a, 2003b, 2004). These dreams typically involve animals interacting with the dreamer in gender-specific ways. In a characteristic dream narrative, a woman sees an infant animal either in her home or in the forest and calmly watches it. Invariably, the animal wants to be treated as a pet and eventually tries to suckle the mother-to-be.<sup>8</sup> The woman resists, continuously pushing the animal away and trying to ignore it, but she eventually succumbs to the small its persistence because she 'knows/sees and feels its sadness' (*quiaenoeba*). As soon as the animal places its mouth on her breast it becomes an Ese Eja child and says, 'Mum, it is me!' and the woman immediately wakes up. Thus Siobi, a neighbour, described the origin of her son's name:

My son's name is Tortoise. I know that because I dreamt it when I was about eight months pregnant. I was in my fields when I saw a small tortoise under a fallen tree. . . . He looked at me longingly and I knew its joy from seeing me (*quiabameeba*). . . . I wanted to take care of it. When I went to pick it up it wanted to nurse but I wanted to put it aside to keep working. I thought that I would later rock it in my hammock. It

kept trying to nurse and then it called me *nai* (mother) and became an Ese Eja, my baby. That is when I awoke.

For men, the most common dream scenario involves hunting.<sup>9</sup> In these cases, either the man is hunting the animal concerned or the animal is chasing or threatening him, in effect ‘hunting’ the man. Immediately before the man kills or succumbs to the animal, the animal reveals itself as an Ese Eja and identifies himself or herself as his child by saying, ‘Don’t kill me Dad, it’s me’. The expectant father feels both the animal’s fear as well as the immediate joy and does not hunt/kill it. Na, one of the oldest men in the village, described the source of his daughter’s name:

I know that my daughter’s name is Porcupine because of my dream. I was hunting when I saw a small porcupine. It had seen me and so I cornered it in the brush. I was aiming my arrow at it when suddenly it said, ‘Dad, do not kill me!’ It was Ese Eja. That is when I woke up. My daughter was one month old when I had this dream.

These dreams capture moments between life and death. When the human is about to kill, in an instant they see the sign or hear the signal to makes them realize that the non-human other should live. In restraining the otherwise typical reflex to kill, they are rewarded with the knowledge of the true name of their child, who will take the name of the non-human other when born.

### *Hunting tales*

Hunting tales are plentiful throughout lowland South America, and they are told on a near daily basis. Among the Ese Eja, these are linked to livelihoods and to the intricate relationships they have with forests and non-human animals, particularly those relationships involving the power dynamic referred to earlier in the prey/predator/ally triad between humans and non-human others.<sup>10</sup> While there is widespread acknowledgement that animals are people, as can be seen in Ese Eja creation stories (Burr 1997; Alexiades 1999; Peluso 2003a, 2021), individual animal personhood is seldom an issue. Instead, hunting stories centre on successions of hunting, sharing meat and eating. Indeed, food-sharing constitutes the social person, and hunters are key social actors. Furthermore, before meat is eaten, it is desubjectified from an animal’s personhood through a range of different acts that resolve any ontological dilemmas regarding its edibility (Fausto 2007).

The composite of hunting stories that I summarize here focuses on the rare instances when people choose not to kill an animal. While unproductive hunts and sparing animal young are common occurrences in hunting episodes, the instances referred to here are specific to those moments when a

hunter comes face to face with an adult animal and chooses *not* to kill them. Such encounters tend to happen most often with jaguars, deer and white-lipped peccaries. Both jaguars and deer are quintessential representatives of Edósikiana, an all-powerful and temperamental supreme forest being who embodies the continuous loop of the life/death cycle by bringing illness, but who also serves as the crucial link with healing. Peccaries, on the other hand, are believed to be temporarily transformed *emanokwana*, deceased relatives. While jaguars, deer and peccaries are typically killed, these are the animals toward whom exceptions are sometimes made.

The sudden decision not to kill is made over the fleeting seconds in which the animal presents itself in a manner that is not characteristic of its species behaviour. For instance, it will move differently than expected, or approach the hunter slowly or make an unusual sound – yet in all instances, it will stare directly into the hunter's eyes. The non-human other's conduct stops a hunter in his tracks, and although these are fleeting moments, time is described as standing still and all actions seem to happen in slow motion. The animal's uncharacteristic behaviour is a signal to the hunter that it is unusual, and that it is communicating its uniqueness to the hunter. Given the former ease of transmutability between humans and animals, the hunter is reminded of the animal's personhood in ways that accentuate familiarity and sameness rather than strangeness and difference. Even if the hunter decides to shoot, something happens to stop them, such as the hunter's rifle jamming, and in cases when a hunter does decide to shoot, the animal will just get up and walk away, turning its gaze back onto the hunter. Yet the most common scenario is that the hunter immediately recognizes that he is in the presence of a non-human other, and despite the potential threat to his own life, he decides to let them live. While this decision occurs over a split second, the hunter recounts multiple observations that stretch out over a much longer time span than has transpired.

### Reflections on narratives of empathetic encounters

Ese Eja encounters with non-human others entail a wide range of possibilities contingent on the knowledge that the visible body and affects of non-human others are potentially linked to the their *eshawa* (the intangible immaterial dimension of personhood) and hence linked to the *eshawa* of the spirit world at large. This is because *eshawa* are themselves the embodiment of even more powerful *eshawa*. The greater an *eshawa*'s ability to transform, the greater is its phenomenological presence and scope of power (Peluso 2003a, 2004, 2021). Encounters with non-human others, particularly in intense contexts such as those I have just described, reveal an underlying philosophical and epistemological order of the temporo-historical times of *yawaho nee nee* ('long ago'), when transformations between people and animals were more common and the boundaries between multiple worlds were

more fluid. Such encounters broaden conventional ideas about time because they reflect a multi-spatio-temporal orientation of the overlapping realities of *yawaho nee nee*, present and future.

By insisting that certain animals ‘are Ese Eja’, people are not merely referring to the common humanity once shared with animals. Their use of the present tense suggests that humans and animals continue to share this humanity in the form of *eshawa*. In the case of Iba, she was an old acquaintance from another village, one whose story of suffering was well-known to all. In the case of the small animals whose presence in dreams led to children taking on the animal’s name, moments of clarity appear just in time for the animal to be scooped up rather than killed or resisted. In the hunting tales, the animals spared are perceived as strong non-human animals or deceased relatives.

Encounters such as those with Iba and other non-human others described here are narrated calmly, yet their recounting often entails detailed descriptions of the physical sensations that unfold during an encounter or lead up to one, such as rapid heartbeat, sweating, excitement, hyper-sensitivity, visual clarity and – always – the slowing down of time. In another Amazonia example of a strikingly similar encounter, Paweł Chyc (2020) describes a Moré hunting encounter with a white-lipped peccary. Out of nowhere, the Moré hunter, who was hunting with two other people, ‘suddenly’ finds himself alone and face-to-face with a peccary who was ‘unusually big, alone, and stood in place directly in front of him, looking straight at him’ (Chyc 2020, p. 105). Like the Ese Eja encounters previously described, the Moré encounter produced a warped sense of time that elongated the experience and evoked a deep knowledge within the hunter that this was not any ordinary peccary – that he was indeed a radical other. Indeed, being solitary in the forest can serve as a portal for potential contact with radical others whose sameness can potentially pose a threat, a state which most Amazonians identify as making them potentially vulnerable.

In the following sections, I will present ideas from across several disciplines to illuminate the intersection between *Augenblick* and Ese Eja exceptional moments of empathy. In bringing together adrenaline studies, cognitive studies, neuroscience, sports science, psychology and anthropology, I hope to shed new light on Ese Eja, and other Amazonians’ descriptions of their physical experience of empathetic encounters.

### The ‘rush’

What happens to the body during a ‘rush’ – whether a person is hunting, dreaming or under attack – can certainly be spoken of in Western ontological terms with reference to what adrenaline does to the body, particularly in relation to visual perception. Consideration of how empathy arises in the Ese Eja contexts as previously described might lead one to suggest that these stress-infused moments provide examples of Thompson’s assertion



that 'embodiment' is part of 'enactive cognitive science' (Thompson 2001; Thompson and Varela 2001); hence, stress is embedded in the entire organism, not merely in the brain. Thompson substantiates this with reference to the work of Rizzolatti et al. (1997), which further situates perception within the moving body and *all of its senses*. As such, 'seeing – is a way of acting' (Thompson 2001, p. 3) – at least it is that first moment of seeing that catalyzes whatever follows. Indeed, it is here that *Augenblick* – an illuminating seeing that necessitates swift action, like the precise shooting of an arrow – can perhaps also be thought of as resting alongside social and neuroscientific theories of recognition and mirror neurons.<sup>11</sup> Sight stimulates the full body as part of one's social cognition: the way that one processes, remembers and uses information to understand their own behaviour and the behaviour of others. Sensorial simulation is how one experiences the world. Mirror neurons – neurons that fire both when one acts and when the one observes the same action performed by another thus, 'mirroring' the behaviour of the other, as though they themselves are acting – enable recognition and action (Gallese 2001).

*Augenblick* can also be thought of as 'openness', which Vasudevi Reddy (this volume) views as moments of intense or direct connection between 'self and world', implying that there is no boundary between self and world, and that 'I-Thou' moments are perhaps more open and whole. Before proceeding to braid these cross-disciplinary ideas together, I will review what happens to the human body during adrenaline-infused moments.

Adrenaline (epinephrine) is a hormone that is released by the adrenal glands and particular neurons when our bodies are stressed (Lieberman et al. 2013).<sup>12</sup> The hormone can induce a 'flight or fight' response by increasing a person's heart rate, blood pressure, body temperature and sugar levels, and can also cause a 'pupil dilation response' and heightening of the senses (Arani et al. 2019). While excitement is normally associated with 'adrenaline rushes', it is the latter effects of increased levels of adrenaline – the dilation of a person's pupils, which lets in more light and sharpens their vision; and heightened senses – that initially raised my interest in the roles they might play in hunting experiences. In general, hunting is seen as a state of stressed physicality. Adrenaline contributes to this physical state by causing heightened perception and intense visual acuity, both of which are often described in Ese Eja hunting narratives.

Most adrenaline studies focus on sports, but while hunting is a form of livelihood and not recreation, it similarly entails physical activity through casual or organized participation, and requires physical ability and skills while also providing a degree of enjoyment. Hunting is certainly linked to moments of excitement and 'adrenaline rush' in its physical effects. Neuroscience perspectives aside, I am persuaded by Ese Eja notions of the fabrication of the body and the idea that they are constituted differentially through *their own and others' actions, through acts of giving and receiving*. This is to say that they have mastered their bodies in particular ways. While Ese

Eja do not view hunting as an adrenaline-inducing activity, stress-related bodily experiences are nonetheless experienced in some of their encounters with non-human predators, but these occur alongside insightful moments of clarity and enhanced thinking. Indeed, a study on extreme sports found that participants do not seek ‘thrills’ but rather the ‘deep sense of relaxation and mental and emotional clarity’ that these intense experiences render (Brymer 2010 p. 228). In parallel, others have shown how pupil dilation is consistent with higher attentional allocation, memory use or the interpretation of more difficult material (Siegle et al. 2003). These studies, which offer mental clarity and rumination as adrenaline-related benefits, closely align with Eje Eja expressions of empathetic moments in hunting encounters.

### *Augenblick*

As clarified earlier, Eje Eja orientations towards the world, regardless of their individual personal experience, provide them with a particularly intimate framework within which to infer the state of other beings, and while the language of empathy refers to this as perspective-taking, it can also, here, be referred to as perspective recognition – the idea that one acknowledges the unique perspectives of others through recognizing other beings as human. This is where Eje Eja notions of seeing/knowing bring the empathetic process to a moment that can be illuminated through the notion of *Augenblick*, particularly in the way that it forefronts the visual, especially when confronting a world constituted by so many non-visible entities. As I described earlier, *Augenblick* for Aristotle is *kairos*, an opportune and decisive moment when conditions are right for accomplishing a crucial action (White 1987); while for Heidegger, *Augenblick* as a key moment of vision, which impels resolution (Heidegger 1962, p. 394). Indeed, *kairos*, as originally analyzed by Onians (1951) and since by others (White 1987; Rämö 1999; Paul 2014; Cocker 2017), is

the passage through which archers sought to shoot, with a sense of “critical time”, “opportunity”; for there the opening in the warp lasts only a limited time, and the “shot” must be made while it is open’ – the decisive shooting of an arrow.

(Onians 1951, p. 346)<sup>13</sup>

It seems all the more appropriate for an analysis of empathy and hunting to be framed as *Augenblick* – an opportune moment of sight needing to be acted upon within the fleeting moment itself. Furthermore, such a moment is a culminating one, fed by the multimodal processes from which it arises: the moment when one sees things for what (and who) they are – recognizing a being as a certain kind of radical non-human other based on sameness – and decides to either shoot an arrow or not. For Eje Eja, this is a moment of truth, one which entails seeing reality for what it is and one which resurrects

the earlier time of non-human undifferentiation and keeps Ese Eja potential animality in sight.

Figurative and literal moments of arrow-pointing (as literally accounted for in male naming dreams and hunting stories) are the *Augenblick*, emerging as moments for illumination and decision-making – moments of empathy. Although I have only presented a few brief illustrations, there are numerous stories that involve decisions to kill or not kill non-human others. Unlike Willerslev (2004, p. 639, 646), who frames his analysis of empathy and hunting around mimesis as a form of deriving understanding with the potential for manipulation through ideas of 'double perspective' as a process which enables an 'empathetic relation',<sup>14</sup> I instead focus on empathy as a moment of overwhelming understanding fed by cultural processes and hyper-physicality that enhance the senses through the visual encounter, the *Augenblick*. This moment brings forth an instant that creates that pang – that flashing, fleeting moment that might relate to the triggering of mirror neurons, the surge of adrenaline in one's body and/or the coming together of Ese Eja pasts and futures, a moment that can also be defined as a transient 'opening' between the self and the world (Reddy, this volume). The point here is that in many cases, rather than responding to a 'flight' instinct, empathy as the antithesis of fear creates an entirely different set of options.<sup>15</sup> What these options are will play out differently time and time again. How Ese Eja describe this can take many forms, including how something prevented them from shooting or how they knew that they had to shoot – all understandable as part of the encounter between the solitary hunter and the non-human other.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, solitude of any kind is a vulnerable state of being for Ese Eja, one that always holds the threat – for better or worse – of potential transformation. What all these moments of encounter have in common is that Ese Eja, over a few fleeting seconds, are able to recognize a non-human radical other for who they really are and able to quickly decide how to respond. They are unveiled and instantly visible as non-human persons.<sup>17</sup> The *Augenblick* as an empathetic flash is a moment of recognition of radical sameness, and as such, it is an ethical moment.

Another consistent experience that accompanies these moments of vision, of *Augenblick*, is the strong sensation that time has slowed down and that everything around oneself comes sharply into focus, not only visually and aurally but also in term of one's own bodily sensations. Numerous neuroscientific studies link the effects of adrenaline to the 'illusion' or 'distortion' that time is prolonged and elongated (Eagleman et al. 2005, p. 10369). Some claim that this is because vision apparently takes the world into account in a delayed mode, as part of a 'fixed-lag smoother' (Grush 2005, p. 24), meaning that 'the visual system can take into account information from the immediate future before committing to an interpretation of the event' (Rao et al. 2001, p. 1245). In other words, there is a gap before it appears 'online', so to speak (Rao et al. 2001, p. 1245). This aligns with Eagleman's findings that humans live in the past by 100 milliseconds (Eagleman

2010; Eagleman and Sejnowski 2000). This creates a condition of ‘postdictive awareness’, whereby the brain incorporates visual information after its occurrence and retrospectively interprets what has happened. While neuroscientists will describe a present moment as a synthesis occurring outside of one’s conscious awareness whereby information reaches the brain at different speeds and is reconstructed (Restak 2011), as anthropologists we would regard the present as always being part of the past and the future.

For instance, the ‘rush’ signalled by Kisa’s screams, which alerted others of Iba’s arrival, also brought an onslaught of past knowledge about Iba, about the circumstances that might lead to Iba rest upon little Hisha and the visual array of information that not only slowed time down but simultaneously created an awareness of reality that sometimes only an extenuating event can force one to recognize. The hunting and naming dreams also force moments of decision upon often reluctant or surprised individuals as they potentially embrace parent roles.<sup>18</sup> The hunting tales in which animals are spared are moments of surprise and confrontation between a hunter and a non-human radical other. It is within such encounters – as with cinematic delay that exceed the one-tenth-of-a-second rule of time-delay recognition – that multiple interpretations come to consciousness and make us aware of thought processes normally taken for granted. It is also perhaps in moments of such sudden and meticulous awareness that empathy becomes a clear ethical choice.

## Conclusions

This chapter has briefly brought together a wide range of disciplinary ideas concerned with empathy that deserve further attention: *Augenblick*, radical sameness and difference, adrenaline-infused physicality, recognition, emotional intelligence, human and non-human sociality, visuality and time. As Goldstein, a neuroscientist, states, ‘adrenaline is important philosophically because it operates at exactly the border between the mind and body, the voluntary and involuntary, the creature and the human’ (Goldstein 2006, p. xii). Cultural anthropologist Webb Keane explains that while the neurophysiological effects of adrenaline are ‘indisputably real’, they do not define the specific emotion that takes shape, and yet at the same time ‘no meaningful definition of the emotion is not utterly independent of those effects’ (Keane 2018, p. 34). In sum, social constructions ‘take up the affordances that neurophysiology makes available’ (Keane 2018, p. 34).

This chapter has in part been an initial exploration of the way that culture takes up such affordances by beginning to tell the story about how Ese Eja experience and show empathy in moments of stress – induced by extraordinary encounters with the radical sameness of the radical other – turning their focus to the world instead of away in instances of high risk to the self. In this way, empathy can also be viewed as an opening up of the senses in the moment of sight, in its moment of recognition, of seeing a

radical other for who they actually are, and thus simultaneously leading one toward an ethical decision. Empathy is its 'own moment' (*Augenblick*) as a 'site of appropriate ethical decision-making, which cannot be determined in advance in its entirety but must be attained through deliberation in the opportunity of its own moment' (Grant 2015, p. 220). For Ese Eja, recognition and any potential ensuing ethical decisions that arise from recognition, are not fixed *a priori* but rather form and are informed by the unique and sophisticated dynamic of each encounter as it emerges within multiple spatio-temporal moments.

As Throop puts forward in his poignant manifesto (this volume), the radical alterity of the other is an intrinsic and 'irreducible' part of the empathetic experience (Throop and Zahavi 2020). He goes so far as to say that 'empathy is thus a disclosing of another's primordial experience' (this volume). If so, then what could be more 'primordial' than an empathetic encounter with a radical other who marks the nascent undifferentiation of humans and animals? A radical other whose sameness challenges the very idea of selfhood? In this way, empathy is a critical enactment of 'making people' through recognition, and thus acknowledging and 'making personhood'. The various empathetic moments, described previously, whereby one decides within a nanosecond whether a luminary radical other can live or not live ultimately reflects an ethical decision, no matter what the outcome, that exceeds the ontological underpinnings of Ese Eja reality and opens of the full sensorium towards the recognition of an other.

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## Notes

- 1 This article focuses on Ese Eja peoples, who comprise a lowland Amazonian ethnic group of about 2,000 individuals living in eight communities spread over 500 kilometres along the Beni, Madre de Dios, Heath and Tambopata rivers in the border regions of Pando, Bolivia, and Madre de Dios, Peru. The Ese Eja language belongs to the Tacana language family, itself part of the Macro-Panoan group of languages of western Amazonia. Most Ese Eja plant swidden horticultural fields, hunt, fish, gather and extract and process forest resources for their own consumption and for commercial trade; they also periodically and variably engage in forms of labour with townfolk and move between rural and urban environments (Alexiades and Peluso 2003, 2009; Peluso 2015a).
- 2 Throop uses a phenomenological approach to examine empathy and extensively builds upon the work of Edmund Husserl (1859–1938) and Edith Stein (1891–1942). See Throop (2008).
- 3 As Webb et al. (this volume) point out, Western science sees non-human animals as radical others because they are not attributed a theory of mind, yet most animal behaviour scientists now view some non-human animals as possessing a variety of subjective states.
- 4 Grant (2015) discusses *Augenblick* in the context of Book VI of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (350 BCE) and Heidegger's *Being and Time* (1962). This leads him to contrast *Augenblick* as 'an authentic present, against the inauthentic "now"' (Grant 2015, p. 220).
- 5 See also Peluso (2015b) for how relationships between humans and non-humans play into children's notions of othering.
- 6 This formulation builds on the work of many, including McCallum (1996), Conklin (2001a, 2001b), Fisher (2001), Overing and Passes (2002) and Vilaça (2002, 2005). Londoño Sulkin (2017) has referred to some of these features as composing the 'Amazonian package'.
- 7 This is distinct from saying 'I am happy', *quiaeno* or *eya quiaeno*. Also note that these words also serve a wide polysemic range of purpose, one that is reflected in the English gloss.
- 8 It is not unusual for women to breastfeed young domestic animals. However, in many of the naming dreams I have heard, women nurse animals that they would not normally, as ducks, turtles and rats.
- 9 For Ese Eja, dream imagery is important not only in ascribing personal names but in guiding such activities of daily life as hunting, working in the fields and even bathing. The presence of certain animals in dreams, for example, can be interpreted as hunting omens. My collection of dream symbols has been triangulated across Ese Eja communities.
- 10 See Zent (2005) for a detailed description and analysis of Joti hunting as a holistic rubric of multi-natural perspectivism in all aspects.
- 11 It is beyond the current scope of this chapter to address the literatures that discuss recognition in terms of sensory functions (e.g. Honneth 1996; du Castel 2015).
- 12 Adrenaline's role as a neurotransmitter is viewed to be both an exception and archaic (von Euler 1971).



- 13 In the same work, Onians (1951, p. 346) notes the analogy between *kairos* and weaving. This, too, has been taken up by a multitude of scholars.
- 14 I reject the critique of Willerslev (2004) and others (e.g. Ramos 2012) that perspectivism does not have practical examples or applications, particularly as the model derives from the bottom up. While models of perspectivism are certainly worthy of critique, the wholesale practical application of perspectivism was not claimed by Viveiros de Castro in the way that it is being criticized, nor does the criticism reflect many Amazonian realities, where the ideas brought together under the framework of perspectivism form basic epistemological understandings of the world. By 'double perspective', Willerslev (2004, p. 639) refers to how the hunter imagines the animal's perspective through his own mimetic faculty without losing track of his own perspective.
- 15 'Fight or flight', which triggers adrenaline production and was originally described by Cannon (1932), is a physiological parasympathetic nervous system response theorized as having developed for early human to defend themselves against life-or-death threats from predators.
- 16 Even when individuals hunt as a group, they describe these moments as solitary. See Chyc's account of a Moré hunter's description of how, while hunting in the forest, all his companions suddenly disappeared from sight and his gun stopped working as he locked into an intense gaze with a peccary (Chyc 2020).
- 17 Chyc (2020, p. 118) offers an excellent analysis of how such moments reflect the visibility of the otherwise 'opaque inside', someone 'hidden behind the surface' of their animal body. Also, see Mezzenzana (this volume) on emotional sameness and empathy.
- 18 For a discussion on gendered differences in empathy, see Strauss (2004).

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# 13 Implications of children’s social, emotional, and relational interactions with robots for human–robot empathy

*Jacqueline M. Kory-Westlund*

## Introduction

Social robots are a new technology designed to help and support people in a variety of domains, including healthcare, workplaces, transportation, education, and entertainment. Social robots are distinguished from other robots, e.g., spacefaring robots or industrial robots, in their leveraging of human social cues to create more intuitive interfaces for human–machine interaction (Breazeal et al. 2016a; Breazeal 2004). Human social cues include speech, prosody, gaze, emotional expressions, gesture, mimicry, synchrony, and more; these are cues individuals naturally use to communicate and can readily interpret. Social robots are frequently programmed with expressivity, nonverbal immediacy, and social contingency. *Nonverbal immediacy* refers to the perceptual availability of one’s interaction partner, i.e., the use of nonverbal behaviors (gaze, gesture, posture, and so forth) to signal general responsiveness and attentiveness. *Social contingency* refers to performing social actions, such as emotional expressions or changes in posture or gaze, at appropriate times in a social interaction in response to an interaction partner. Expressivity means being emotionally evocative, with a range of expression – for example, some robots use principles of animation (Lasseter 1987) to drive their motor movements to give a sense of lifelikeness (Kory-Westlund et al. 2016a). Many social robots are designed to be anthropomorphic or zoomorphic to better engage humans and enable human-like means of communication (Figure 13.1). They are also frequently programmed to use artificial intelligence and machine learning to adapt their behavior to individual people during interaction.

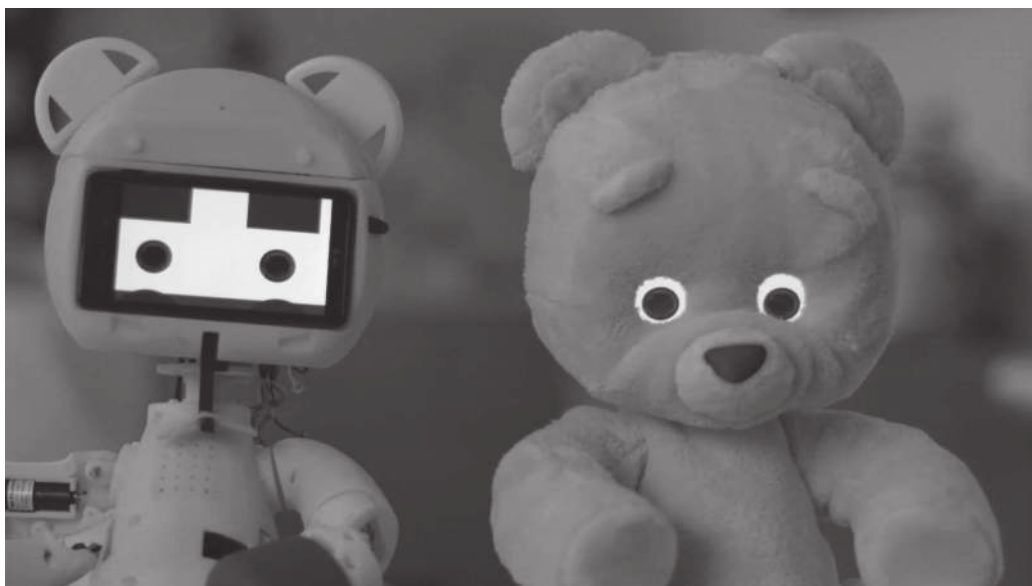
Research from the past two decades has shown that humans regularly engage with social robots in highly social and emotional ways – and further, in what may be considered relational ways. By relational, I mean that people form relationships, of some kind, with these robots. They treat these robots as responsive, interactive agents with whom having a relationship is possible – as agents for being with rather than merely artifacts for use (as in a tool) or for play, exploration, and learning (e.g., playful objects, see Ackermann 2005; or transitional objects, see Winnicott 1953). This suggests empathy



on the part of humans – which is what this chapter delves into. While there are many definitions and models of relationships in the social sciences (for an overview of those most relevant to relationships with social robots, see Kory-Westlund et al. 2021), none preclude forming relationships with non-human entities – whether a companion animal, a stuffed animal, a favored car from the 1950s, or a social robot.

Human–robot relationships do not look identical to human–human relationships, and the fact that I say there are relationships does not imply anything about people's capacity for empathy with robots. What I mean is that many features commonly associated with human–human relationships are also observed in human–robot interactions, and some of these features may point us toward considering human–robot empathy – such as repeated interactions through time (for a discussion, see Kory-Westlund 2019; Kory-Westlund et al. 2021), creating shared experiences based on activities done together and changing as a result of such interactions through personalization and memory (Gordon et al. 2016; Lee et al. 2012; Leite et al. 2013, 2017; Park et al. 2019; Ramachandran et al. 2017; Scassellati et al. 2018), responsiveness to and rapport with the other (Kory-Westlund and Breazeal 2019b; Lubold et al. 2018; Park et al. 2017a, 2017b), reciprocity, positive emotion (Leite et al. 2012), attachment and friendship (Weiss et al. 2009; Emmeche 2014), and trust (Bickmore and Cassell 2001; Desteno et al. 2012; Hancock et al. 2011; Kidd and Breazeal 2008).

People who participate in human–robot interaction (HRI) studies in labs and in real-world contexts frequently say social robots have social presence, i.e., the sense of being with an other (Biocca et al. 2003; Leite et al. 2009; Oh et al. 2018). They rate the robots as having both social and relational qualities (Darling et al. 2015; Kory-Westlund et al. 2018; Turkle, Breazeal, et al. 2006; Zawieska et al. 2012), including many of the properties of pets, toys, computers, artifacts, digital assistants, and human friends, while not sharing exactly the same set of properties as any of those (Bartlett et al. 2004; Jipson and Gelman 2007; Kahn et al. 2012, 2002; Kory-Westlund et al. 2018; Melson et al. 2005; Weiss et al. 2009). For example, children may say that a robot is intelligent and can be sad but does not deserve the same moral consideration as a human child (Kahn et al. 2012); or that a robot can think, be happy, and feel tickles, but does not eat or grow (Kory 2014). As Darling (2016) discusses, violent behavior toward robotic objects feels wrong to people, even if they “know” that the “abused” object does not actually feel anything – however, something about robots' behavior and responsiveness leads them to consider robots differently than other objects. Even when a robot is arguably less social – for example, lacking the capacity for speech, as with a Roomba vacuum cleaner robot or an Aibo robot dog – people still tend to attribute intelligence to them, and talk to or about them in social ways (Bemelmans et al. 2015; Chang and Šabanović 2015; Druga et al. 2018; Fink et al. 2012; Moyle et al. 2018; Sung et al. 2007; Wada and Shibata 2008).



*Figure 13.1a* The Huggable robot, designed for interaction with children in medical settings, with and without its fabric skin. Personal Robots Group.



*Figure 13.1b* A girl reaches out to touch the Tega robot's face during interaction. Personal Robots Group.



*Figure 13.1c* Tega robots, showing the electromechanical body on the left and covered in a fabric skin on the right. Personal Robots Group.



*Figure 13.1d* A boy plays a storytelling game with the Dragonbot robot on a shared game table surface. Personal Robots Group.

While this is only a brief summary of some evidence showing how humans behave with social robots, the main takeaway is that people appear to treat social robots as social-relational others even if they represent another that is radically different. That is, when technology is designed to act in social-relational ways, with apparent agency and interactive capabilities, people appear to interact with it as intended. Social robots, then, are a unique and intriguing tool for helping us learn about human social behavior – such as our capacity for empathy. The remainder of this chapter will discuss human empathy through the lens of children’s interactions with social robots.

### **Empathy for social robots**

Empathy is the experience of an other’s mindedness – the perception that another has an embodied mind, that the other is necessarily distinct from oneself (Zahavi 2014a, 2014b). Empathy is necessarily an *I-thou* relation: it is a relationship that emerges from interacting with others (Throop, this volume). In the context of human–robot interaction (HRI), I ask: Do humans feel empathy for social robots? Given that social robots do seem to be treated, in general, as social-relational agents – agents with whom relationships (of some kind) are possible, agents with many properties that could be considered attributes of an entity with a mind (such as the capacity for thought, or for feeling tickles) – what does human–robot empathy look like?

In HRI, “empathy” has been used to mean a variety of concepts, the two most common of which are first, something akin to emotion contagion and sharing of another’s feelings; and second, as something combining a theory of mind and the ability to attribute mindedness (thoughts, beliefs, emotions, desires, etc.) to an other (Nørskov et al. 2021). Because HRI is the study of humans interacting socially with robots designed to trigger our social responses, empathy, under some definition or other, is a key element in many studies – whether the researchers use the term or not.

Much HRI work tries to understand how humans experience interactions with a robot; many of these studies focus on emotions, rather than the experience of mindedness more broadly (Cross et al. 2019; de Jong et al. 2020; Kwak et al. 2013). For example, de Jong et al. (2020) operationalized empathy as feeling appropriately happy when a team member wins a game versus sad when they lose, and examined whether humans felt this way about a robot team member as well as about a human team member. Cross et al. (2019) performed a neuroimaging study in which participants viewed videos of humans and robots experiencing pain or pleasure, and found some activation of similar neural mechanisms in both cases. Some studies have instead used behavioral measures, which move toward understanding people’s experience of robots beyond empathy as emotion. For



example, Darling et al. (2015) measured the effects of both lifelike movement by a simple robot and a backstory about the robot on people's hesitation to strike the robot with a mallet, and compared this to people's trait empathy, as measured with the Interpersonal Reactivity Index; they found that people with higher trait empathy hesitated more, especially when they heard the backstory, suggesting that stories can increase empathic responses.

Several theorists in HRI are pushing for the field to adopt a more relational definition of empathy: empathy as interaction. They argue that we ought to consider empathy as part of the human experience – that it does not matter what features a robot has (e.g., whether it “has” emotions or merely mimics emotional expressions in interaction with humans), rather, what matters is how humans experience the robot (Coeckelbergh 2014; Damiano et al. 2015; Darling 2016; Gunkel 2015, 2018, 2020; Nørskov et al. 2021). This focus moves closer to a definition of empathy as being the experience of mindedness of an other (Throop, this volume; Ferguson and Wimmer, this volume). Thus, the question “Do humans feel empathy for robots?” asks what the human experience of robots is – which is fundamental to HRI. In the next sections, I explore this question through the lens of children's experience of robots.

### **Children's experience of social robots as in between**

Children, in particular, appear willing to treat robots as social-relational interaction partners in a range of settings: in labs, schools, hospitals, and homes; and for education, healthcare support, entertainment, and more (e.g., Conti et al. 2020; El-Hamamsy et al. 2019; Jeong et al. 2018; Kahn et al. 2013; Kory-Westlund 2019; Logan et al. 2019; Singh 2018; van Straten et al. 2020). Children respond to the robot's use of human-like social behaviour: e.g., they readily listen to and speak with the robots, and attend to the robot's posture and facial expressions. They adjust their speech and behavior to communicate with robots during learning tasks (Batliner et al. 2011; Freed 2012; Kanda et al. 2004) and follow a robot's gaze direction to, e.g., figure out what the robot is talking about (Breazeal et al. 2016b; Kory-Westlund et al. 2015; Kory-Westlund et al. 2017a; Meltzoff et al. 2010). Children also respond to relationship-building behaviours: children mirror emotional expressions such as smiles and other behaviors such as head tilts and word use (Chen et al. 2020; Gordon et al. 2016; Kory-Westlund et al. 2017b); help the robots with tasks, take turns, and show affection such as hugs and gentle touches (Jeong et al. 2018; Kory-Westlund and Breazeal 2019b; Park et al. 2014); and disclose personal information such as their names, favorite colors, and stories about themselves (Kory-Westlund et al. 2018; Kory-Westlund and Breazeal 2019c). All of these behaviors are associated with children's friendships, real and imaginary, and close relationships

(Gleason and Hohmann 2006; Hartup et al. 1988; Newcomb and Bagwell 1995; Rubin et al. 1998). Furthermore, the more socially responsive and reactive a robot was programmed to be – increasing its nonverbal immediacy and social contingency – the more likely children were to engage positively and learn expected material during activities (Kennedy et al. 2017; Kory-Westlund et al. 2017b; Kory-Westlund 2019; Park et al. 2017a, 2017b).

The research so far shows that children appear to form relationships with robots that are somewhat like – though not identical to – their relationships with other entities. The relationships are not one-sided, unlike those with imaginary friends or parasocial characters. With imaginary friends, children project a relationship, creating a friend that provides them with some aspects of their real relationships, such as conflict, help, and nurturance (Gleason 2002; Taylor 2001); children are generally aware that these friendships are pretend (Taylor 2008). Parasocial relationships, similarly, are projections: one-sided, emotional relationships developed with characters, e.g., in games or from television, that take on a self-other quality rather than a self-avatar quality (Brunick et al. 2016; Calvert 2017; Richards and Calvert 2017). Robots, however, are physically in the world. They are programmed to interact and respond to the child, in some capacity, which creates a relationship that is unique and different from children's other relationships. This capacity to respond to the child is what distinguishes social robots from inanimate things and imaginary friends, and brings the robotic technology closer to the realm of pets and people: to things with minds, for which children may have empathy (for more on children's relation to animals, see Mezzenzana, this volume).

### **Robots as in-between**

As Coeckelbergh (2011a, 2011b) has argued, the language we use with robots partially constructs our relations to them. When the robot moves from being spoken about indirectly to being spoken with directly, the robot moves from “it” to “you” – from third-person other to second-person interaction partner. We have examples in HRI of language use around robots affecting the intentionality attributed to a robot (Stenzel et al. 2012), people's automatic mimicry of a robot (Klapper et al. 2014), hesitation over hitting a robot (Darling et al. 2015), and children's behavior (Kory-Westlund et al. 2016b). This change from “it” to “you” also occurs when robots are interactive and responsive. Because of this shift, I hypothesize that children's experience of social robots involves empathy. Robots are experienced by children as others with minds, capable of interaction, as *someones* rather than *somethings*. They attribute personhood and intentionality to robot others, no matter how radically other they might seemingly appear to be.



Robots' interactive capabilities suggest that children react *in the moment*, during interaction, as if robots are social-relational beings that respond to them in kind. But is reacting in the moment to a robot as a social-relational being the same as believing that the robot is, in fact, its own self with a social-relational life of its own – e.g., are children's reactions to robots indicative of empathy for robots and evidence of their experience of robots' mindedness? Prior work from a neuroscience perspective has shown that people act and think differently when being third-person observers than when being in second-person interaction with something (Schilbach et al. 2013). Here it is important to ask: when children step back from the interaction with the robot to reflect on it, becoming third-person observers of their own behavior and of the robot, how do they construe the robot?

Research suggests that on reflection, children do experience empathy. Children appear to think of robots as being not quite like people, nor like mere machines. They place robots in an “in-between” ontological category – neither living nor non-living (Gaudiello et al. 2015; Kahn et al. 2012, 2011; Severson and Carlson 2010), with the attributes and properties of both living, social agents and inanimate, technological artifacts (Bartlett et al. 2004; Druga et al. 2017, 2018; Gordon et al. 2016; Gordon and Breazeal 2015; Kahn et al. 2002; Melson et al. 2009; Weiss et al. 2009). As Sherry Turkle has termed it, computers and robots are evocative objects with marginal status: they are between other things and raise metaphysical questions about infinity, self-reference, paradox, animism, and what it means to be alive (Turkle 1984, 2006; Turkle et al. 2006a).

The majority of children I have observed reported during semi-structured interviews that the robots they interacted with would feel sad, would try to help, wanted companionship, and had genuine feelings (Kory-Westlund 2019; Kory-Westlund et al. 2018; Kory-Westlund and Breazeal 2019c). Children ascribe psychological properties (e.g., thinking, being happy), perceptual abilities (e.g., seeing, feeling tickles), and properties of artifacts (e.g., being man-made, able to break) to robots, and rarely ascribe to them biological properties (e.g., eating, growing) (Jipson and Gelman 2007; Knox et al. 2016; Kory 2014; Kory-Westlund et al. 2016b). They talked about the robots similarly to how they talked about their friends (Kory-Westlund 2019; Kory-Westlund et al. 2018). They reported feeling as close to the robots as to their pets, friends, and parents, though depending on the exact behaviors displayed the robot, they might also report feeling closer to their best friend or to their parent than to the robot (Kory-Westlund 2019; Kory-Westlund et al. 2018; Kory-Westlund and Breazeal 2019b). When compared to other entities, the robot was placed in the middle – not as human as babies or cats, not as machine as a mechanical robot arm or a computer (Kory-Westlund and Breazeal 2019c). Children responded socially to robots as they do to humans, including mirroring their behaviors, such as patterns of language use (Kory-Westlund et al. 2017b; Kory-Westlund and

Breazeal 2019a, 2019b), curiosity (Gordon et al. 2015), and mindset (Park et al. 2017c). In short: children both interact with robots as if they are social and relational, and they believe in the robot's social-relational nature on a deep enough level to report that belief to the experimenters. They seem to experience the mindedness of robots.

Whatever the biological mechanisms for human-human empathy – involving, on various theories, the evolution of social groups, cooperation, cohesion, synchrony, and general survival (De Waal 2008; Zahavi 2014a, 2014b) – the same systems are co-opted or partially activated by other entities that have some human-like features. The more human-like, the more empathy. Human shared-feeling systems are activated when an agent is perceived in an I-thou way, a relational way – which is precisely what happens when children encounter social robots.

### **Robots as emotive, social agents**

Sherry Turkle has written much about children's conceptualizations of computers and computerized toys (Turkle 1984; Turkle et al. 2006a, 2006b). In her earlier writing, she claimed emotions were one differentiating factor between alive entities and computers. This is no longer considered to be the case, since agents can be and are designed to display social and emotional characteristics. Robots can use sensory input to know something about the user's own emotional state. Today's robots are also more likely to direct activities. They are not merely responsive smart toys, like the Speak and Spell and other early computer games and robotic systems that Turkle analyzed; they are reactive and proactive. This is a significant difference in the technology itself and in how it is likely to be perceived. The social-relational robots I have worked with are agents more than they are machines. Current AI makes the rules social robots follow complex enough that – like with people – the rules are not easily deciphered. As time goes on, this complexity will surely increase and the rules even less easy to predict and discover. So, while they are programmed to follow particular scripts and react in particular ways to sensor readings, this is apparent only to the programmers and designers, not to the children who interact with them. To children, they take on a magical quality, a lifelike quality, an interactive quality. The appearance of the robots – fluffy, colorful, cheerful, with many of the mechanical and electrical components hidden – boosts children's recognition of the robot as agent for interacting, an agent with a mind of its own, rather than machine that can be controlled.

Turkle discussed how one criterion children use to determine an entity's aliveness is ethical discourse. How we treat other entities morally – e.g., is it OK to step on it? Can we kill it? Must we treat it gently? – inform children's understanding of their status as alive or not. Bugs can be stepped on and killed, but parents are likely to scold children for stepping on other children or on their pets. The behavior of adults and experimenters around

the robots that children interact with may be partly informing children's opinions, as well as the behavior of their friends and the treatment of robots in media.

For example, at the beginning of most child–robot interaction studies, an adult experimenter/facilitator leads the child into a room where the robot is set up, and introduces the child to the robot. Usually, the facilitator introduces the robot as a social agent: e.g., by giving it a name, talking to it, or telling children they can converse with it. The facilitators generally tell children to be gentle with the robots and ask them not to hit the robots. Children are explicitly told that it's not okay to deliberately turn the robot off or crash it during an experiment. Such directions, when combined with the facilitator's social behavior toward the robot, might indirectly be indicating to children that the robot is a moral agent – something to be encountered with empathy – and may be predisposing children to interact with the robot as an agent with a mind, rather than as a machine: children may simply be following the lead of the knowledgeable adult in the room.

One study by Williams et al. (2018) has directly examined whether a voice-based smart toy (a talking doll) can influence children's social conformity and moral judgments. They observed 40 children aged 4–10 years interact with the doll, with a human, or with no agent during two key tasks: a social conformity task in which children judged whether certain moral statements were OK or not OK (such as whether it was OK to tease another child), and a disobedience task, in which the experimenter showed children a box, asked them not to look in the box, and then left the room for a few moments. They found that the doll, like a human, could influence children's moral judgments, but that it did not affect children's disobedience. This work suggests that children did trust the opinions of the smart doll and did react to its moral suggestions – treating it as an agent with moral opinions.

Contemporary media does not dissuade from the view that robots can be moral agents and friends. While there are plenty of American movies featuring killer robots and machines trying to take over the world (such as *2001: A Space Odyssey*; *Bladerunner*; *I, Robot*; and *Terminator*), there are also an increasing number of popular movies featuring friendly, lifelike robotic agents or animated non-human sidekicks (who may or may not be robots) (e.g., R2D2, C3PO, and BB8 *Star Wars*, Johnny 5 in *Short Circuit*, Astro Boy in *Astro Boy*, Baymax in *Big Hero 6*, and WALL-E and Eve in *WALL-E*). There are many similar agents featured in comics (e.g., Atomic Robo, H.E.R.B.I.E. in Marvel comics, Kelex in *Superman* comics), books (e.g., Gizmo from the *Colony Mars* books, Tik-Tok from *Ozma of Oz*), and video games (e.g., EDI in *Mass Effect 2* and *3*, Marcie from *Final Fantasy Adventure*). Our research robots reflect the likeness of these robots and sidekicks – their animacy, their familiarity, their relatability. Anyone who interacts with a robot brings with them expectations about what the robot will be like, based on their prior experience with robots (real, or in media). Many of the 4–7-year-olds I worked with were familiar with this genre of

friendly robot sidekick and recognized pictures of some or all of R2D2, Baymax, and WALL-E, which means they were already aware that robots can fill a friendly role.

Granted, there is a difference between the kinds of interactive, social research robots children may encounter in our lab or field studies, and the kinds of robotic toys and technologies available on the market for children to play with at home. Such a technology gap between scientific labs and the average consumer market is however rapidly shrinking. What these studies can conclude is that in a controlled experimental study, there is more space for the illusion of life and fostering empathy among children toward robots. Because the interactions are not open-ended and will not continue indefinitely, greater effort can be placed on creating an interactive agent that appears responsive, reactive, proactive, and lifelike within the constraints of that particular experimental interactive scenario.

### **Robots out of the lab, into the world**

When we move out of the lab into the world of commercial robots, home assistants, and AI-enabled smart toys, we see children explore a variety of questions and behaviors with them in an effort to understand them. For example, Druga et al. (2017) observed 26 children interact with a variety of agents, including an Amazon Alexa, Google Home, Anki's Cozmo robot, and the Julie Chatbot. They observed younger children asking questions about various agents as a person (such as its age and favorite color) and older children trying to understand how the agents worked, such as whether it had a phone inside it, what actions it could take, and what it knew. They also tested the limits of the devices, such as checking whether the agents could see as well as hear, or repeating questions to see if the agents would give a different answer. The children often said the agents were as intelligent as they themselves were and that the agents were friendly and trustworthy. It did not appear, however, that children were at all confused about whether the agents were people – they did treat them socially, but they also appeared to understand that the agents had limits and had access to different knowledge or capabilities than people do. Sherry Turkle described the same kinds of explorations of computerized toys that we are seeing now with smart toys and AI assistants: exploring what the toy or agent is, how it is made, what it is capable of, what its limits are, and very often, treating it socially as an agent (Turkle 1984). I would expect that now, because so many of our devices are designed to interact in social ways (e.g., through voice interaction), children's interactions increasingly leaning toward the social realm of interactions.

In an attempt to understand how children perceived the intelligence of these agents in comparison to how they viewed human and animal intelligence, (Druga et al. 2018) performed another study in which they asked children and their parents to assess the intelligence of a mouse and of a small

robot and of themselves during a maze-solving task. They found that most parents and children thought the robot was smarter than the mouse, and about half of participants said both agents were smarter than themselves. Importantly, older children often mirrored their parents' mental models about the intelligence of both agents. This suggests that parents' knowledge of agents – such as robots and mice – can heavily influence children's perceptions of these agents. This is interesting in light of the generational differences in the kinds and amounts of technology available to today's children versus their parents. With smart phones, tablets, computers, robots, AI-enabled home assistants, and smart toys all becoming ubiquitous for many of today's children, we might expect that the understanding they have of computational devices is very different than that of their parents, especially given how socially-oriented many of these devices are. Yet, computers have always been magical black boxes, to some extent at least. Perhaps parents' mental models of past computers can be transferred to current devices without losing much in terms of understanding how those devices work. It is also intriguing to wonder how one's experience with technology might change or update one's mental models of these devices, since with experience, one comes to recognize the capabilities and limits of a system. Druga, Williams, and colleagues (Druga et al. 2017, 2018; Williams et al. 2018) have explored how we might develop new activities and experiences that help children and their parents understand what these new technologies are capable of, how they work, and what they are, arguing that helping people learn how technology and AI function is critical to enabling them to live with technology in informed, ethical ways.

These observations and questions about children's and parents' experiences with current robots and smart devices shine light on the ethical questions that pervade the development of any new technology. Every new technology raises concerns about its use and misuse; its capacity for deception and social manipulation; its ability to promote emotional attachment and reliance; its authenticity; its transparency; its relation to privacy, security, and safety; and its embodiment of existential threat to human specialness and uniqueness. Social robots are not fundamentally different than other technologies in this regard, though they may be unique in that they raise all of these concerns at once (Boulicault et al. in press; Kory-Westlund 2019).

### **Robots as “just robots”**

One ethical question Turkle's work raises is whether children know what robots are, and whether they ought to be informed – by an authority figure or by the robot itself – about a robot's true nature and its capabilities. This question brings to mind the movie *Robot and Frank*, in which the humanoid helper-robot explicitly and frequently reminds the elderly Frank (who is coming to rely on the robot) that, “I'm just a robot, Frank.” But



what does “just a robot” mean? Is it supposed to mean that robot is somehow just a machine, programmed, following scripts, doing what it is told? Social robots are more than mere machines in how we approach them and interact with them. For example, the mere fact that children frequently say goodbye to robots – when they do not say goodbye to toasters or iPads – lifts robots into a more people-esque category. Perhaps “just a robot” is supposed to remind us that robots are not people, that they do not have minds of their own (even if we experience their mindedness), that they have significant limitations and do not really understand anything? Is saying “just a robot” acknowledging the Chinese Room problem (Searle 1980) behind today’s robots (that is, the robot has the appearance of life and understanding without actually understanding)? Due to the nature of its algorithms, it is reactive, responsive, proactive, even inventive – but it does not understand; it is not conscious; it has no “soul.” Is this the “truth” we want children to understand about today’s robots, that we think they don’t already understand?

I think children who interact with social robots already have a sense of robots’ in-between nature. They use anthropomorphic language to talk about the robots, but they place them farther away from human adults, human babies, and cats, and closer to frogs, teddy bears, computers, and tables. They talk about their friends differently than the way they do about robots. Robots are not their friends; they are their robot-friends; a new kind of experiential relationship, a new type of othering that is radically different from other kinds of relationships. Children know robots occupy an in-between space. They know robots have marginal status – and unlike adults of a generation who did not grow up living with pervasive smart devices and smart toys, I think children are OK with that. It’s just a robot, Frank. Children are growing up believing that things other than humans can and do have intelligence, as Sherry Turkle predicted. They experience robots as having minds. The new ontological space that social robots occupy is just that: a new category, in-between the others, erasing the line that used to divide a binary and sticking something radically new in the middle. I think children are not confused about the new category – in fact, the opposite. They understand and need the new category because there are an increasing number of things in the world now that fit in it.

Asking whether children know what robots are assumes that children are confused about robots. Piaget introduced the conception of a child’s worldview as primitive and animistic, wherein children indiscriminately attribute life to objects and agents alike (Mead 1931, 1932; Oesterdiekhoff 2015; Piaget 1932). From this point of view, one might expect children to be confused in their attribute of lifelike qualities to robots, since children are similarly confused in attributing lifelike qualities to other objects as well. However, as Mead (1931, 1932) argued, and is evidenced by my observations and other recent studies discussed earlier (e.g., Jipson and German 2007), children do not appear to be confused – rather, they have clear conceptions of what constitutes living beings versus nonliving objects, and have clear ideas about



what properties such beings and objects each have. Children rightly think that robots occupy an in-between space with some qualities of living beings and some qualities of artifacts and some qualities of machines.

That said, children may not have technical knowledge about how robots work or what makes a robot function the way that it does. For example, Turkle talked about how children in the 1980s often fixated on their toys' batteries as explanation for how the toys worked (Turkle 1984). Children would talk about how the batteries were food; they talked about the importance of the batteries. In one of my studies, as part of a relationship assessment one morning, the robot talked about how it was sad because it could not play as much because it had to wait for its battery to charge (Kory-Westlund 2019). Several children expressed confusion: "Wait, you have batteries?"; "Why do you have batteries?" The batteries are no longer a focal point – instead, they are invisible. Children are focusing on different parts of the robot, such as its smartphone face. Children understand that smartphones can do a lot; when they see that the robot has a smartphone component, they likely attribute some of the intelligence of the phone – which they are familiar with – to the robot. Turkle discussed how the smart toys of the 1980s were opaque. Children could not understand them using physics, so they turned to psychological explanations. Now, when children faced a robot whose inner technical workings they do not understand, children still reach for the familiar. But their familiar has expanded. Their set of explanatory tools includes not only the psychological, but also the computers and smart devices that are part of their everyday lives.

With early computational toys, children could learn to program and use that understanding of programming to understand how their toys might function. In our current world with its proliferation of smart devices, children need to learn about computers, robots, programming, and AI. Learning how a computer works, how a smartphone works, and how to teach an AI algorithm how to solve a problem or play a game removes a little bit of the "magic" behind their function. But I do not think that teaching children what makes social robots tick removes the magic and immediacy of interaction, as it is happening, in the moment. As one example, even the undergraduate and graduate students in our lab – all of whom have a hand in designing, programming, or testing social robots! – talk about them anthropomorphically, easily fall into conversation with the robots when we are testing new dialogue trees or interactive scenarios, happily make silly faces just to explore what animations the robot will play as it mirrors them, and generally interact socially when the robot engages them socially.

This anecdote says something profound about how powerful the social is for humans. We are social beings. As social beings, we have a full range of social others with whom we might interact, such possibilities now include the radical othering of social robots. We have evidence that *being with* – being present and immediate – strongly affects human psychology (Guerin 1986; Henderson et al. 2006; Johnson et al. 2009; Kory-Westlund et al. 2021; Li 2015; Trope and Liberman 2010). Turkle (1984) wrote about

how early computers drew children in, leading them to deeply engage and become experts above and beyond their teachers in early programming languages and video games – but the power of social robots is different than the power of immersive games or new technological tools for creating. The power of social robots arguably comes, in large part, from their social presence and social-relational power. They are unlike other existing technology – differing even from voice-only agents and virtual agents – because they engage our capacity for empathy, and we experience their apparent mindedness even if they are radically different from us.

## Conclusion

Designing social robots as social-relational agents enables them to close the interaction loop. Children respond to them as social agents with whom they can form relationships; the robot can respond in kind, leading to more engaging, real, and reciprocal interactions. This turns these robots from objects that children project onto (like toys, imaginary friends, and so forth) into others for *being with* – others perceived as having minds. Children appear to empathize with robots.

The immediacy of the interaction and children’s social-relational engagement appears to drive their empathy. That is, children are in the moment, responding socially and naturally to an agent that engages them in kind, and they do not need to reflect on a meta-level about what that agent “really is” during interaction. However, even when children step back and think about what robots are, they still report that robots are social-relational beings. Their opinions seem to be shaped in part by the others around them. Adults, parents, experimenters, teachers, and other children influence children’s mental models about robot cognition and intelligence, and affect their view of robots as social and moral entities.

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# Afterword

## Empathy's entanglements

*Carolyn Pedwell*

What does it mean to think and sense beyond empathy's iterative associations with emotional equivalence, fellow-feeling, or humanisation to instead confront its deep and immanent entanglement with radical otherness? What, in turn, are the implications of understanding empathy not as simple or singular but rather as an unfolding set of socio-biological, techno-cultural, and politico-ethical relations that imbricate the human and non-human within worldly transactions and ecologies? These are two of the central questions this interdisciplinary volume explores with considerable distinctiveness, acuity, and insight.

Such concerns are salient in a context in which we may now be approaching 'peak empathy', as the literary scholars Emily Johansen and Alissa G. Karl claim in their introduction to *Rereading Empathy*. Liberal contemplation and debate concerning 'how much empathy we ought to spend, and where we ought to spend it', they note, 'is matched by an overall swell in attention to empathy in education, therapeutics, media and scholarly circles' (2022, p. 3). Or, as I argued in *Affective Relations: The Transnational Politics of Empathy* (2014), in the midst of late liberalism, empathy has become a Euro–North American socio-political obsession. Understood in shorthand as the ability to 'put oneself in the other's shoes', empathy is what we want to cultivate in ourselves and others. It is the affective attribute that we want to define 'our' society and that which we hope will characterise our interactions with those living outside our borders. Yet, precisely because it is so widely and unquestioningly viewed as 'good', empathy's invocation can effect a conceptual stoppage in conversation and analysis. The most pressing questions have thus tended less to be 'what is empathy?', 'what does it do?', 'what are its risks?', or 'what happens after empathy?', but rather the more automatic refrain of 'how can we cultivate it?'. The result, I have suggested, is a sentimental politics of feeling that fails to confront the fundamental ambivalence of empathy – how, that is, empathy can distance as much as it connects, exclude as much as it humanises, fix as much as it transforms, and oppress as much as it frees.

As the present volume illustrates compellingly, however, centring radical otherness in our discussions of empathy opens up the concept to a host of



more critical, expansive, and generative investigations. If, in the face of contemporary social, cultural, political, and economic relations, empathy has been most commonly articulated as the affective act of seeing from another's perspective in ways that assume the possibility of direct psychological access or easy affective identification, foregrounding the relationship between empathetic engagement and otherness attunes us powerfully to the question of *empathy's limits* – as well as its orientation towards that which is experienced as 'foreign', both internally and externally. Focusing on empathy and radical otherness also highlights how – in its intertwinement of unfolding cognitive, affective, and somatic processes – empathy 'does not exist in isolation from other capacities', or from the particular environments and ecologies in which it arises and take shape: it 'is entangled within and amidst selves and others, and emerges in places and settings and within moments and times that are particular to people, places and context' (Peluso, this volume). In other words, empathy is not universal and it is not one thing – it is generated, experienced, and felt differently via different transnational circuits and relations of power.

### Empathy as limit experience

As a number of this book's contributors note, empathy, in its very processuality, has no precise limit point: it is, as Douglas Hollan observes, 'always in motion as people's emotional states and perspectives change over time, and even from moment to moment, sometimes as a result of having been empathized with' (this volume). Nonetheless, actual occasions of empathy always emerge from and involve limits. As C. Jason Throop puts it, invoking Emmanuel Levinas, 'the other with whom we are experientially intertwined always exceeds us' – and, as such, there is 'a necessary asymmetry between the experiencing subject and the subject who is experienced by them' (this volume). From this perspective, empathy is not premised on the possibility of emotional equivalence, nor is it necessarily oriented towards the transformative potential of fellow-feeling; rather, it is 'an experience of the limits of accessing another's first-person experience directly'. Empathy, as such, is a *limit experience* which 'discloses the other *qua* other' (Throop, this volume) – whether this other is a person, an animal, a fictional character, an intelligent machine, an idea, a linguistic translation, or a molecular bio-chemical process. What becomes vital, however, as editors Francesca Mezzenzana and Daniela Peluso underscore, is *how*, exactly, empathy 'enables us to understand, imagine, and create otherness' (this volume) – the particular ways in which it might allow us to appreciate and grapple with alterity within current ecological conditions, including the alterity within, or which brushes against the limits of our own self-understanding.

There is a range of rich philosophical, psychological, and cultural genealogies for thinking empathy as a more-than-human set of relations oriented towards the experience of otherness, alterity, or foreignness. Most salient



to several contributors across this volume are the German phenomenologists writing in the early twentieth century, namely Edmund Husserl, Edith Stein, and Max Scheler, who associated empathy and sympathy with the affective capacity to enter the minds of others, with an emphasis on embodied perception, attunement, and sensing. For Stein, in *On the Problem of Empathy*, empathy is ‘the perceiving [*Erfahrung*] of foreign subjects and their experience [*Erleben*]’ ([1916]1989, p. 1). It is how we come to ‘experience foreign consciousness in general’ (Stein [1916]1989, p. 110) and, through this process, understand that our ‘own zero point of orientation is a spatial point among many’ (Stein [1916]1989, Translator’s Introduction, xxi). As Susan Leigh Foster notes in *Choreographing Empathy*, in Stein’s view, ‘empathy was the bodily experience of feeling connected to the other, while at the same time knowing that one was not experiencing directly the other’s movements or feelings’ (2010, p. 164). In the midst of late liberalism and its postcolonial biopolitics, I want to argue, Stein’s use of the term ‘foreign’ is suggestive, connoting both those materials and forces that lie outside the fleshy boundaries of the individual human body and those (frequently racialised, sexualised, and classed) bodies and practices excluded from the ‘we’ of the nation or community.

In this context, contemplating empathy’s entanglement with otherness attunes us to how, while particular experiences of empathy may produce transformative connections, they can also generate damaging exclusions – and to how empathy, more generally, involves unevenness, failure and ‘translations that go awry’ (Grewal 2005, p. 24). This is particularly the case, as a number of chapters across this volume illustrate, when ‘the foreign’ is constituted as threatening and affective articulations of ‘us’ and ‘them’ manifest in reduced empathy for out-group members (Ferguson and Wimmer, this volume). It is salient, in this respect, to foreground the colonial legacies of empathy and sympathy. As Foster argues, in interactions between British colonisers and the people they encountered in North America, Africa, Asia and the Pacific, ‘sympathy and empathy each served to establish the grounds on which one human being could be seen as differing to another’ and were thus mobilised ‘in part, to rationalize operations of exclusion and othering’ (2010, p. 11). For the eighteenth-century Scottish philosopher Adam Smith, for instance, sympathy (which he defined similarly to modern understandings of empathy)

accrued to those in a civilized society who lived in relative comfort and those of better means possessed greater sympathy. Savages, in contrast, necessarily spent their time tending to their own needs with no available time to devote attention to another.

(2010, p. 142)

As these kinds of examples make clear, empathy has long been employed as an affective ingredient in the construction of pernicious social, cultural, and

geopolitical ‘difference’. To invoke the late critical theorist Lauren Berlant’s words, empathy, then, turns out ‘not to be so effective or good in and of itself’, but rather ‘merely to describe a particular kind of social relation’ (2004, p. 9).

At the intersection of contemporary forms of post-coloniality and global capitalism – or what Jennifer Wilson calls ‘the Empathy Industrial Complex’ (2021) – empathy remains implicated in powerful modes of biopolitical governmentality. We might consider, in this vein, how empathy and compassion are cultivated to create certain forms of value and profit within the international aid apparatus. In her analysis of humanitarian interventions in Haiti, for instance, Erica Caple James employs the term ‘compassion economies’ to address the dynamics through which ‘the suffering of another person, when extracted, transformed and commodified through maleficent or beneficent interventions, can become a source of profit for the intervener’ (2010, p. 26). In my own work (Pedwell 2012a, 2012b, 2014, 2016, 2021a), I have similarly explored what happens when empathy becomes a competency defined primarily in terms of its market value, whether via the affective discourses of American presidential politics, the neoliberal rhetoric of ‘the empathy economy’, or the emotional politics of international development. Across these overlapping domains, gendered social and geopolitical hierarchies are central to determining who has access to profitable affective capital on the one hand and who is confined to performing unrecognised emotional labour on the other. With this in mind, it is clear that a focus on radical otherness must confront empathy’s uneven constitution and effects – the particular hierarchies and exclusions the cultivation of empathic capacities can (re) produce in an international frame.

Contributors to the present volume open up critical analysis of the unfolding biopolitics and geopolitics of empathy to other salient relations and domains, with a focus on the complexities of collective efforts to redress historical articulations of radical otherness. Esra Özyürek’s chapter, for example, considers how contemporary Holocaust education initiatives can ‘become a mechanism for excluding racialized minorities from the moral fold of the German nation’ when Muslim minority Germans are judged as not feeling ‘the right’ feelings or not engaging in the (narrow) empathic journeys such programmes intend. Turkish and Arab-Germans, in particular, who express fear or envy instead of shame, remorse, and a desire to accept responsibility in response to such initiatives, Özyürek suggests, generate ‘public discomfort’ which elicits various modes of affective policing, censure, and exclusion. As such, the imperative to disrupt notions of radical otherness can function precisely to amplify such othering (Özyürek, this volume). While compelling approaches in phenomenology, affect studies, and other interdisciplinary fields attune us to empathy’s processuality, mobility and unpredictability, then, powerful examples such as this one indicate the concomitant importance of attending to how empathy ‘sticks’ (Ahmed 2004) – how it tends to circulate via established networks of social and cultural investment.

For Özyürek, however, twentieth-century German phenomenology – and particularly Edmund Husserl’s work – continues to provide generative resources. While Husserl’s concept of intersubjectivity has long been (mis) translated as ‘mutual understanding’, he was, as psychological anthropologists have recently argued, much more interested in the affective dynamics of ‘changing places’ – understood to be premised on the embodied experience of difference, limit, and misinterpretation (Duranti 2010 cited in Özyürek, this volume). From this perspective, as Özyürek illustrates, we can shift the focus from the ‘inappropriate’ emotions of minority communities to the fundamental problems with visions of national belonging that offer ‘a single historical perspective as a moral standard’. The enemy of social justice and accountability is not, from this angle, insufficient or undeveloped empathy per se, but rather visions of empathic connection that fail to take into account the significance of location, power, and translation – or, the true nature and implications of empathy as a limit experience.

### Alternative empathies

A key insight emerging from this volume is that appreciating difference, alterity, and situated relations as central to any experience of empathy might better orient us to the cracks, openings, and lines of flight for engaging with otherness otherwise. This is, in fact, resonant with Stein’s ([1916]1989) earlier formulation of empathy and ‘the foreign’ – her phenomenology, I want to suggest, orients us most potently towards how engagement with what is experienced as ‘foreign’ need not inevitably lead to the reproduction of problematic sameness or difference; rather, in particular conditions, it might open out to an experience of being deeply affected by that which does not simply confirm what one thinks one already knows (Pedwell 2014, 2016).

Along these lines, the visual scholar Jill Bennett, in her book *Empathic Vision* (2006), figures empathy as ‘a mode of thought that might be achieved when one allows the violence of an affective experience to truly inform thinking’ (2006, p. 55). Thus, while empathy is frequently approached as an exercise of cultural mastery which depends on amassing accurate knowledge of the cultural ‘other’ – or more generally as the ‘assimilation of what is foreign into what is familiar’ (Butler 2012, p. 12) – something quite different might unfold when one actually surrenders oneself to being affected by that which is experienced as ‘foreign’. That is, in approaching empathy as something other than emotional identification with another subject or ‘the transcription of a psychological state’ (Bennett 2006, p. 38), new forms of affective connection and solidarity across differences might take shape. Indeed, for Stein, as Foster paraphrases, ‘multiple subjects could experience empathy collectively, creating a distinction between an “I” and “you”, while also bringing into existence a “we”’ (Foster 2010, p. 164).

What is perhaps most striking about Bennett’s discussion of ‘empathic vision’, however, is that it is not centred on relations between two (or more)

embodied subjects but rather on our affective connections with visual art, and particularly non-representational forms of art. While affective modes of responding to art associated with a sympathy that depends on identification with characters and their narratives are often tied to moralities that follow predictable logics of intelligibility, Bennett (2006) argues that those associated with a mode of empathic vision – conceived as a critical ‘shock to thought’ (Massumi 2002) generated by our direct engagement with art’s affective force – have the potential to move us beyond pre-set narratives, opening up a more radical space of ethical engagement. In this way, Bennett’s writing resonates with wider critical scholarship which argues that it does not make sense to figure empathy as necessarily linked to ‘humanising’ practices of care because it is not a property owned by or encapsulated within the boundaries of human subjects. That is, while empathy may describe the cognitive and/or emotional quality of particular human relationships, it might also explain a wider range of more-than-human relationalities and processes of ‘affecting and being affected’, to invoke Spinoza’s (2002) much cited formulation.

Empathy, as such, may occur intersubjectively between differently located embodied subjects but also unfold above or below the level of ‘the subject’ – playing out via scales and speeds that are not ‘our own’ and involving various forms of complexity, opacity, and indeterminacy. In this vein, Robin Truth Goodman’s chapter in the present volume considers how, in a complex economy, empathy ‘underlies transactional relations not only with strangers, but also with invisible and unknown abstract market interactors’. From this perspective, empathy is not only an affective mode of access to ‘a community of feeling in a spatially expansive market society’; it is also, in its fundamental relationship with alterity and uncertainty, a cognitive-sensorial mode of engagement with ‘a world filled with the unexpected, the unfamiliar, and the different’ (Goodman, this volume). While Goodman explores how the development of technologies of travel and communication have demanded increasing interactions with strangers and unknowns which empathy arises to navigate, Jacqueline M. Kory-Westlund examines how socio-technical innovations – including artificial intelligence (AI)-enabled technology, Internet of Things (IoT) devices, digital assistants, and smart toys – mean that many people now engage robots in ‘social, emotional, empathetic, and relational ways that complicate their positioning within common thought as radically different others’; dynamics which suggest more-than-human forms of empathy that affectively and materially entangle a range of human, non-human, and inhuman entities and processes within changing political-economic, socio-technical, and natural-cultural ecologies.

In exceeding (without disavowing) the emotional dynamics of ‘the subject’, these alternative visions of empathy actually return us to empathy’s original usage in German aesthetics to describe our cognitive and somatic relationships to the non-human and more-than-human. Originally coined by German aestheticians in the early twentieth century as a translation of

the German word *Einfühlung* ('feeling into'), empathy came to 'denote the power of projecting one's personality into the object of contemplation and has been a useful term in both psychology and aesthetics' (Garber 2004, p. 24). As Gregory Currie notes, while we now 'think of empathy as an intimate feeling-based understanding of another's inner life', a century ago, discussing empathy for intimate objects 'would have seemed very natural' (2011, p. 82). Such genealogies of empathy, I want to suggest, bear interesting resonances with (as well as distinctions from) contemporary new materialisms and affect theories, which have, in varied ways, sought to address the limits of post-structural theories of linguistic signification in grappling with questions of materiality, agency, and transformation (Pedwell 2020). For the philosopher Brian Massumi (2002, 2015), and others working in the Spinoza/Deleuze tradition, for instance, 'affect' is precisely that which 'escapes confinement' in human bodies, subjectivities, and relations. It refers to 'an entire, vital and modulating field of myriad becomings across the human and nonhuman' (Seigworth and Gregg 2010, p. 6). Focusing on empathy's links with the immanent dynamics of radical otherness can, then, as Mezzenzana and Peluso suggest, generatively expand the range of others imagined to be involved in various worldly relations and entanglements of empathy.

Crucially, however, these Euro-North American trajectories of empathy are not the only, nor the most salient, frameworks for understanding these kind of cognitive, affective, and somatic processes and their implications across many transnational cultures. In her discussion of 'subaltern empathy', for instance, the literary scholar Sneja Gunew considers various paradigms for understanding emotion that move beyond 'European categories of affect theory' (2009, p. 11) – including the anthropologist Anand Pandian's analysis of 'the figurative topographies of sentiment and sympathy sketched in a genre of funeral elegy (*oppu*) in South India' (Gunew 2009, p. 8) and the postcolonial scholar Dipesh Chakrabarty's discussion of the Bengali concept of the 'exemplary' or 'compassionate heart' (*hriday*) (Gunew 2009, p. 19) (see also Gunew 2016). Relatedly, Joan Anim-Addo turns to literary accounts of the gendered 'history of the Caribbean slave plantation' to 'delineate a trajectory and development of a specific Creole history in relation to affects' (2013, p. 5). Against 'consolidated, universalising and Euro-centric conceptualisations of affect', she develops a 'differentiated cartography and literary archaeology of affect' that pays critical attention to how affective creolisation occurred in and through intimate sexual relations in the context of slavery (Anim-Addo 2013, p. 5). As I have argued elsewhere (Pedwell 2014, 2016), the imperative here – as indicated by Anim-Addo's use of the term 'creolisation' (see also Glissant 1997) – is not to see the world as composed of discrete, culturally particular traditions of feeling, but rather to explore the ways in which such affective discourses, practices, and experiences have been produced relationally and are, as such, genealogically implicated in one another.



Also at stake here, however, are diverse genealogies of affect that resist reduction to – or remain incommensurable with – Eurocentric and/or anthropocentric logics. Such dynamics are engaged powerfully in the present collection via the chapters by Mezzenzana and Peluso, which mobilise insights from their longstanding anthropological work with indigenous peoples in the Amazon. As Mezzenzana explores, while the difference between non-humans and humans may seem insurmountable within most Western intellectual paradigms, this is not the case for indigenous people of the Amazon, ‘for whom access to the inner experiences of non-humans seems to be relatively unproblematic’. The Runa people, she suggests, ‘manifest empathetic relationships towards animals’ that diverge considerably from Western conceptions of empathy (this volume). Peluso, in this vein, is concerned with the conditions in which empathy with non-human others emerges and becomes salient for Amazonian Ese Eja and what this suggests about radical otherness. While all Ese Eja human–animal encounters are premised on belief in an originary state of human/non-human differentiation, these positions are, importantly, understood as amenable to reversal and change. For example, ‘if a human is seduced by a non-human animal other, they can potentially transform into an animal, even though at first they encounter each other as discrete, separate, and different beings with distinct points of view’. For Ese Eja, then, non-human animals are radically different until, at a moment’s notice, ‘they are not’ and it is ‘within this everyday lingering potentiality, whereby something suddenly shifts, that radical sameness becomes apparent as it unexpectedly emerges from radical difference’ (Peluso, this volume). Empathy, in these moments of transformation involving ‘an opening up of the senses’ is thus ontologically productive, it is ‘a critical enactment of “making people” through recognition’.

As such interventions illustrate powerfully, then, radical otherness is made and re-made within particular worldly ontologies and epistemologies, and empathy is not reducible to sameness or difference, but rather arises amidst the complex, shifting, and politically and ethically charged relations between them; it is, fundamentally, an *affective relation*.

### **Affective relations and ontologies**

To approach empathy as an affective relation is, as I have discussed elsewhere, to become attuned to the relational nature of emotions themselves (how they are not owned by or confined to individual subjects but rather signify complex relations that implicate and constitute multiple affective subjects, objects, and contexts) – as well as to how empathy takes shapes and circulates through its relationship with other sensorial experiences, modes cognition, and affective (in)capacities (Pedwell 2012a, 2012b, 2013, 2014, 2016). As the chapters across this volume illuminate in different ways, this involves cultivating a ‘non-objectifying view of emotions as relational flows, fluxes and currents, in-between people and places rather than



“things” or “objects” to be studied and measured’ (Bondi et al. 2007, p. 3). It is about honing immanent modes of sensing ‘how affect arises in the midst of in-betweenness: in the capacities to act and be acted upon’ (Seigworth and Gregg 2010, p. 2). Thinking and feeling affective relations also, however, demands that we address the ongoing imbrication of empathy with structural relations of power in the context of contemporary biopolitics, geopolitics, and ontopolitics – wherein ‘ontopower’ is understood as a power to incite and orient emergence that ‘insituates itself into the pores of the world where life is just stirring, on the verge of being what it will become and yet barely there’ (Massumi 2015, p. xviii). Conceptualising empathy relationally, then, is to see it as inseparably entangled with ontology: to appreciate how it is implicated in emergent forms of power that work to (re)constitute reality, to mediate the flow of experience, possibility, and becoming in the world.

Questions about the relationships among empathy, ontology, and ontopower assume particular salience and urgency, I want to suggest, in current global conditions in which software, AI, and algorithms play an increasing role shaping the immanent flow of everyday life. Whether in the form of personal recommenders like Amazon and Netflix which mobilise self-taught software to anticipate our preferences, needs, and desires, or context-aware sensors embedded in ‘smart homes’ or wearable computational devices that attune to our unfolding feelings, movements, and rhythms, machine learning technologies are actively redistributing cognition and affect across humans and machines and profoundly changing ‘what it means to perceive and mediate things in the world’ (Amoore 2020, p. 16). With algorithmic architectures now acting to anticipate and shape behaviour and conditions of possibility across social, political, economic, and cultural domains in ways that far exceed human sensorial, cognitive, and perceptual capacities (Pedwell 2019, 2021a), renewed concerns and anxieties emerge concerning human nature, agency, emotion, and sociality – as well as the ethics and politics of our relationships with computational machines.

As Kory-Westlund observes in her contribution to the present volume, through the empathic relations they develop with smart technologies, many American children now ‘place robots in an ontological category in-between the usual dualistic categories of alive, animate beings and inanimate artifacts’ (this volume). While social robots may represent a non-human other that is ‘radically different’, children, she suggests, appear to treat such smart technologies ‘as social-relational others’. This kind of ongoing affective interaction ‘turns these robots from objects that children project onto (like toys, imaginary friends, and so forth) into others for *being with* – others perceived as having minds’ (Kory-Westlund, this volume, emphasis in original). Yet, what demands critical examination within emergent techno-social ecologies is not only the nature and implications of the affective relations that link human and non-human entities, but also the emergence of ‘an authentic cognitive subjectivity’ (Serres 2015, p. 19; see also Pedwell 2019,

2021b) which sutures human and machine modes of sensibility, perception, and thought. The more that we invest in and adapt ourselves to algorithmic architectures, it is argued, the closer we come to a ‘kind of co-identity’ in which ‘we define who we are through digital practice because virtual spaces are becoming more real than visceral ones’ (Finn 2015, p. 190).

These interpersonal and infrastructural developments raise important ontological questions concerning what human – or indeed, non-human – empathy can be said to entail within conditions in which ‘humans are lodged within algorithms, and algorithms within humans’ (Amoore 2020, p. 58). Also at stake at the current socio-political and technological conjuncture, however, is the growing prominence and impact of machine learning technologies which operate *otherwise to* anthropocentric temporalities, processes, and experiences (Hansen 2015). How, that is, machine learning innovations which make AI more ‘intuitive’ or ‘empathic’ do not seek to simulate human sensory, cognitive, or perceptual functions but instead hone computational capacities that may be wholly incommensurable with them and, as such, entail ‘inexperientable experience’ (Chun 2016, p. 55). It is here, perhaps, that the limits of empathy – or empathy’s force as *a limit experience* (Throop, this volume) – rise most starkly to the fore, as human lives, subjectivities, and relations are increasingly mediated, and indeed constituted, by algorithmic processes to which we have no direct access and cannot sense, perceive, or understand, let alone control.

Amidst these shifting configurations of social life, (im)materiality, temporality, and agency, addressing the place, logics, and possibilities of empathy in our changing world requires that we understand it as an affective relation that imbricates ‘the human’ and ‘the non-human’, ‘the immaterial’ and ‘the material’, ‘the cultural’ and ‘the biological’, ‘the personal’ and ‘the impersonal’, and ‘the structural’ and ‘the ephemeral’ across social and geopolitical borders and boundaries. This, I want to suggest, involves attending to empathy’s immanent unfoldings across a range of everyday, more-than-human events and encounters; attuning, that is, to its enmeshment in our habitual and sensory lives (Throop and Duranti 2015; Pedwell 2017, 2021a). At stake here is the possibility of engaging empathically with that which hovers ‘at the very edge of semantic availability’ (Williams 1977, p. 134) – while appreciating that not all aspects of such socio-political, environmental, and technological ecologies are amenable to human perception, recognition, or sensibility. In attuning to these ongoing modes of transformation, conflict, otherness, and entanglement, we might begin to sense, and indeed collaborate in, empathies premised on ‘processes of immersion and inhabitation’ that are ‘more complex and considered that a purely emotional or sentimental reaction’ (Bennett 2006, p. 65, 24). We might, in other words, both appreciate and generate *alternative empathies* – ones that open up rather than resolve, that mutate rather than assimilate, and that invent rather than transcribe.

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# Index

- Adorno, Theodor 165, 179–180  
adrenaline 238, 240, 244–248, 250n12, 251n15  
Agamben, Giorgio 184, 185  
alexithymia 64, 80  
algorithms 268, 287–288  
Almodóvar, Pedro 171n12  
alterity xvi, 6, 9, 11, 14, 17, 19, 27, 29, 37, 200, 219, 228, 249, 280, 283  
Amazonia 18, 19, 198, 201–202, 205, 211–213, 235, 238, 238, 239, 244, 250, 251, 286  
*American Dirt* 167–168  
Anderson, Amanda 156, 170n7  
Anderson, Benedict 148  
Andrews, Kristin 124  
animal xv, 18, 19, 66, 69, 122, 198, 199, 201–213, 216–228, 235–244, 247–249, 250n3, 250n8, 250n9, 251n14, 251n17; behaviour 13, 202–204, 217–218, 225–227, 250n3; care for 205–208, 209–211; cognition 222–223; ethics 123, 124, 216, 218–219, 221, 227; mindedness 6–8, 15, 176, 198, 199, 203–205, 211–213, 217, 223–224, 228; predation 123, 206, 207, 235–236, 240, 242, 246, 251n15; science xv, 216–228; subjectivity 212, 218, 221–223, 229n9, 236, 250n3; transformation 235–237, 239, 243–244, 247; undifferentiation with humans 236–238, 243–244, 247; welfare xv, 165–166, 218, 221, 223–224  
anthropomorphism 9, 18, 66, 73, 86, 124, 212–214, 216–218, 220, 225, 228, 256, 268, 269  
antihero vi, xv, 16, 116, 116–121, 123, 128–131  
Arendt, Hanna 13, 156, 176  
Aristotle 235, 238, 246, 250n4  
Arrighi, Giovanni 168–169  
atmosphere 35–37, 56–57  
attention 8, 13–14, 38, 87, 227–228, 246, 281  
attunement xii, xvi, 13, 14, 28–30, 49, 139, 227, 280, 281, 286, 287  
*Augenblick* 13, 19, 49, 235, 238–240, 244–249, 250n4  
autism xv, 4, 15–16, 64, 78–87, 89–91  
  
Barton-Hronešová, Jessie 11  
behaviourist 219, 222  
belonging 70, 82, 86, 89, 126, 155–156, 175, 180, 283  
Bennett, Jill 283–284  
Berger, John 210  
Berlant, Lauren 282  
Biden, Joseph 171n17  
Binkley, Sam 12  
“Biography of a Bad Shilling, A” 17, 156–158, 163, 167  
Blade Runner (Ridley Scott, 1982) xvi, 265  
Blanchard, Sydney 17, 156–158, 160, 167  
Bloom, Paul xvi, 16, 116, 122, 123, 125–128, 130, 131n3  
Boas, Franz 176  
Boyer, Dominic 10  
Brasil, Assis 164  
*Breaking Bad* 119–121, 129  
Breath of Life, A 171n12  
Brecht, Bertolt xii–xiii  
Breithaupt, Fritz 155, 170n5



- Bubandt, Nils and Willerslev, Rane 30, 144–145
- Buber, Martin 34–39, 46, 47, 49–52, 54
- Burghardt, Gordon 226
- Carter, Forrest 168
- children 3, 8, 19, 69, 84, 105, 108–109, 120, 147–149, 197, 201, 203, 206, 210–211, 238, 241, 244, 250n5, 257, 258–270, 287; conceptions of AI 266; conceptions of computers 264, 269–270; friendships 261–262; and imaginary friends 262, 270; and moral judgments 265; and robots 256–270
- Christianity 12, 108, 138–141, 149, 174, 182–183, 185; and Eastern 139–141
- Christie, Nils 127
- Chyc, Paweł 244, 251n16
- Cixous, Hélène 164
- cognitive film theory 116
- commemoration 147–150
- compassion xiv, 4, 103, 108, 110, 141, 145, 150, 176–177, 198, 205–208, 210, 212, 223, 282, 285; and conservation 223
- Cosby Show, The 126
- Cow (Andrea Arnold, 2021) xv
- Crist, Eileen 220, 226
- Cummins, James 167
- Currie, Gregory xvi, 7, 126, 285
- Deleuze, Giles 229n10
- DeSantis, Ron 166
- Despret, Vinciane 225
- detachment 9, 15, 18, 34, 41–44, 54, 124, 143, 156, 159, 162, 165–167, 169, 170n7, 220, 225
- Diner, Dan 180
- Dirty Harry 117
- dogs 197–198, 201, 203, 206–208
- dramatic irony x
- dreams 19, 69–70, 105, 109, 235, 238, 240–242, 244, 247–248, 250nn8–9
- dual-process model: of empathy 118–119, 130; of human cognition 117
- Duranti, Alessandro 27, 30, 143, 177, 236, 239, 283, 288
- Durrant, Russell 127
- ecological knowledge 204, 212
- Education of Little Tree, The 168
- Einfühlung* x, xvi, 5, 142, 285
- Eliot, Thomas Stearns 47
- emotional: contagion xi–xii, xiii, 5, 60, 71, 198, 217, 260; intelligence 240, 248; recognition 240; sameness 251n17
- emotions x–xiii, 4–5, 7, 9, 12, 16, 17, 19, 34, 40, 47, 60, 64, 66, 69, 71, 80, 107, 111, 117–118, 121–122, 124–125, 127–128, 142, 144, 157, 174, 176–177, 179, 185–197, 198, 203, 210, 212–213, 220, 222, 240, 246, 248, 251n17, 260–261, 264, 283, 286
- empathising-systemising theory 78–79
- empathy: and affect 60, 79–80, 84, 285; affective empathy xii, xiv, 5, 7, 19, 30, 35, 36, 60–67, 70–71, 78–80, 84, 118, 129, 217, 235, 240; as antithesis of fear 247; “basic” 3, 5, 6, 8, 9, 27–30, 198, 200; and biases 2, 15, 18, 117, 122, 128–131, 117, 122, 120, 123, 126, 128–131, 128–131; and biopolitics 281–282, 287; and capitalism 282, 284; “cognitive” 7, 60–62, 78, 80, 123; and colonialism 4, 12, 176–177, 281, 282; “complex” 27, 29–31, 101, 110–111, 177, 205; cross cultural definitions of 30, 101, 198; and curiosity 13, 102, 111–113, 225; as direct experience 27–29 (*see also* empathy, “basic”); double empathy problem 80–81, 83–91; ecologies of 81, 112; “embodied” empathy 112, 116, 130; and environment 1, 3, 7–8, 10, 15, 37, 66, 177, 142, 211, 171n17, 200, 208, 220, 223–225, 228, 237, 280, 288; as ethical moment 238, 247–249; and exclusion 138, 145; failure of 103, 110, 281; and fiction 12, 13, 15–17, 117–120, 126, 154, 155, 158–160, 168; and happiness 28, 29; and harm and violence 30–31, 110–111, 123, 145; and imagination xi, xii, xiv, xv, 2, 4, 5, 9–11, 14–18, 67–71, 86, 111–113, 116, 119, 129–131, 139, 142–145, 154–156, 158, 159, 161, 167, 168,

- 170n6, 199, 200; “imaginative” empathy 116, 119, 121, 130, 131; and imitation 4, 5, 64, 199; and impulse 17, 135, 138, 142, 144, 146, 150, 162; and intersubjectivity x, 5, 8, 19, 27, 30–31, 84, 178, 199, 202, 235–236, 240, 283; and language 226, 240, 246, 262, 268; as learned skill 139, 142; limits of 2, 13, 14, 16, 17, 19, 27–31, 29, 48, 81, 128, 156, 162, 228, 236, 280, 283, 288; measurement of 60–64, 71; and mimicry xi, xii, 63, 66, 262; and mirroring x, xi, xii, xiv, 80, 245, 261, 263, 267, 269; and mirror neurons xii, 6, 62–63, 101, 155, 199, 170n6, 245, 247; and morality x, xiv, 2, 87, 116–134, 139, 240, 246; multi-modal 14, 28, 236, 246; and new materialism 285; and other minds 8, 9, 16, 18, 198, 202, 204, 216, 219, 220, 222, 226, 227, 262, 267, 281, 287; and otherness xv, xvi, 2–4, 18–20, 65–66, 83, 138, 144, 198–199, 208, 228, 235, 238, 279–282, 285–286, 288; pairing 143, 177–178; and perspective-taking 61, 68, 235, 246; as process x, xvi, 4, 6, 10, 16, 30, 71, 81, 101, 102, 104, 110, 111, 113, 135, 139, 142–146, 150, 157, 176, 177, 178, 197–200, 217, 236, 239, 246, 280–282, 284, 285, 288; and psychopathology 64, 122; and science 216–228; and stress (distress) xiii, 19, 35, 61, 64–66, 68, 89, 103–104, 135, 156, 209, 210, 235, 238, 240, 244–246, 248; tactical forms of 30, 144, 145; transference 104, 111–112; and visual art 284
- encounter i, xvi, 2–3, 6, 8–9, 14, 18, 19, 27, 35, 37–40, 45–47, 50, 52, 55, 55n5, 58, 103, 127, 143, 146, 156–158, 160, 165, 167, 181, 197, 199, 201, 204, 209–210, 219, 223, 228, 235–240, 243–244, 246–249, 264–266, 286, 288
- envy x, 181, 183, 187, 282
- Escobar, Arturo 7
- ethics of care 125
- ethology 4, 8, 216–228, 220, 226, 229n9
- extended mind xii
- fictional characters xvi, 12, 13, 67, 70, 116–121, 130, 158, 169
- First Person: Stairway to Heaven* (Errol Morris, 2001) xv
- fluctuation 16, 34, 35, 39, 47–51, 54, 81, 102, 107, 111, 112
- forgiveness 109, 138–139
- Foster, Susan Leigh 281, 283
- Gallese, Vittorio xii, 199
- Gates, Henry Louis Jr. 168
- Gaut, Berys xiv–xv
- Gefuehlskaelte* 179
- gender 3–4, 12, 19, 79, 102, 111–112, 122, 129, 158, 171n12, 171n13, 220, 241–242, 251n18
- Gluck, John 221
- Gobodo-Madikizela, Pumla 146–47
- Goffman, Erving 81, 83
- González, Juan 167
- Goodall, Jane 220
- Goodman, Yahuda 188n1
- Grandin, Temple xv
- Greene, Joshua 117, 124–125
- Greiner, Rae 159
- Grizzly Man* (Werner Herzog, 2005) xv
- Gruen, Lori 124
- Gunew, Sneja 285
- Habermas, Jürgen 179, 180
- Haidt, Jonathan 119, 124
- Halpern, Jodi 142
- Harvey, David 166
- Hegel, Friedrich 6
- Heidegger, Martin 28, 235, 238, 246, 250n4
- Henrich, Joseph 124
- Herder, Johann Gottfried 176
- Hoffman, Martin 122, 125
- Hollan, Douglas 30, 81, 102, 143, 198, 280
- Hollan, Douglas and Throop, C. Jason 27, 30
- Holocaust 4, 17, 18, 174–175, 178–188, 188n8, 282–283
- Hour of the Star, The* (A hora da estrela) 17, 156, 161–165, 166–167, 169, 171n13, 171n14
- Howe, Cymene 10
- hunting 201–202, 205–209, 236, 240, 242–248, 250nn9–10, 251n14, 251n16

- Husserl, Edmund 14, 27–29, 48,  
175–178, 187, 198, 226, 250n2,  
281, 283  
hybrid war 135–141, 146, 149–150,  
151n1
- identified victim effect 68  
I–It *see* I–Thou  
imagination *see* empathy, and  
imagination  
imaginative acquaintance xiv  
impartial spectator 159–160, 162  
inflation effect 67  
intersectionality 88  
intersubjectivity x, 8, 19, 27, 30, 53,  
85, 175–178, 199, 202, 235, 283  
involvement 15, 34, 42, 44–46, 53–55,  
55n4  
Islam (‘Muslim’) 4, 11, 17–18, 46, 69,  
174–175, 178, 181, 183–185, 187,  
188n6, 189n9, 282  
I–Thou/ Thou/ Thou–ness 15, 34,  
38–40, 46–51, 53–56, 245, 260, 264
- Judaism (Jewish) 171, 174–176, 178,  
180, 182–184, 186–188, 188n1  
justice xiv, 10, 12, 16, 17, 86, 90, 106,  
124, 127, 138, 155, 283
- Kahneman, Daniel 117, 128, 131n1  
*Kairos* 238, 246, 251n13  
Kauppinen, Antii 129–130  
Keane, Webb 248  
Kellert, Stephen 210–211  
Kirmayer, Laurence 103–104, 107, 111  
Kohn, Eduardo 202, 207, 213n2, 239
- Lacan, Jacques 170n6  
Levi, Primo 182, 189n10  
Levinas, Emmanuel 29, 280  
Lipps, Theodor 5–7, 10, 176  
Lispector, Clarice 156, 161–169,  
171n12  
Locke, John 199  
Londoño Sulkin, Carlos 250n6  
looking on/on looking 15, 34, 35, 40,  
41, 44–47, 54  
Lynch, Deidre Shauna 160
- Maibom, Heidi L. 120, 122, 125  
Manchin, Joe 171n17  
Marder, Michael 3, 200, 228  
Marx, Karl 17, 36, 158–159, 167
- Massumi, Brian 285  
Matravers, Derek 125  
Mead, George Herbert 88, 268  
measurement of empathy *see* empathy  
mechanomorphism 226  
meeting 15, 35–36, 40, 45–46,  
48–50, 54  
mentophobia 220  
mercenaries 136–137  
method 34–35, 41–42, 51–52, 54,  
55n1, 61, 63–64, 101, 129–130, 156  
Mezzenzana, Francesca 238  
military 12, 17, 135, 138–139,  
141–150, 151n1, 171n17  
mimicry xii, xiii, 63, 66, 256, 262  
mind-body dualism 226  
mindedness 6–7, 15, 198, 203, 205,  
217, 228, 260–262, 268, 270  
mirror neurons xii, 5–6, 62–63, 101,  
155, 170n6, 245, 247  
Mittell, Jason 129  
monotropism 87  
moral agents 83, 87–88, 265  
morality x–xv, 1–2, 10, 14–17,  
31, 45, 47, 68, 83, 87, 88, 101,  
108, 110–113, 116–128, 130,  
135, 138–139, 145, 147, 150,  
155–156, 159, 160, 169n2,  
170n11, 175–178, 187–188, 198,  
206–207, 213, 227  
Morrison, S. 11–12  
Moser, Benjamin 164  
Muehlebach, Andrea 176–177  
Murray, Dinah xvi, 87  
My Octopus Teacher (Pippa Ehrlich  
and James Reed, 2020) xv
- Nagel, Thomas xv, 81, 88,  
199–200, 226  
Negri, Antonio 165–167  
neoliberalism 12, 165–167, 176, 169,  
171n17  
neurodiversity 82  
neuroscience xii, 5–6, 14–15, 62–64,  
155, 199, 235, 238, 240, 244–245,  
247–248, 250n12, 263  
non-human others 8–10, 14, 18–19,  
27, 224–225, 235–244, 246–248,  
250nn3–5, 286  
non-sentient others 15  
nonverbal immediacy 256, 262  
null hypothesis 222–223  
Nussbaum, Martha 127, 154–155, 160

- Obama, Barack 1, 12, 154, 156, 160, 167, 168, 169, 176
- Onians, Richard Broxton 246, 251n13
- ontology 2, 3–4, 6, 7–9, 19, 237–240, 287–288
- openness 34–40, 47, 48, 50, 54, 56, 245–249
- othering 3, 79, 83, 236, 237, 268, 269, 281, 282
- otherness *see* empathy, and otherness
- outsider 81–82
- Özyürek, Esra 143
- Parkinson, Anne 179
- participation 15, 34, 45, 55n3, 187, 245
- Passage to India, A* 16, 125
- Paul, Pamela 171n16
- Pedwell, Carolyn 1, 12–13, 170n8
- personhood 66, 236, 239, 242–243, 249, 262
- perspective taking 2, 9, 61, 68, 235, 246–247, 251n14
- perspectivism 239, 251n14
- Petraeus Doctrine 145
- pets xv, 200, 203, 206–208, 210, 221, 241, 257, 262–264
- phenomenology 3, 6–8, 10, 14, 27–31, 36, 106, 178, 198, 202, 204, 205, 217, 226, 229n8, 236, 238, 243, 250n2, 282–283
- Piaget, Jean 268
- Pinker, Steven 154–155, 160, 170n10
- Pirsig, Robert 81
- Plantinga, Carl 117, 126
- plants 1, 3, 8, 200, 228
- Platzwechsel* 177
- politics 1–5, 10–14, 17, 20, 176–178, 279, 281, 282
- Poovey, Mary 157–158
- positivism 13, 219, 222
- presence 6, 29, 37, 38, 55n4, 57, 60, 63, 139–141, 146, 148–149, 201, 206, 210, 224, 229n7, 243–244, 250n9, 257, 270
- Prinz, Jesse 16, 116, 121–128, 130
- projection 3, 5–7, 9, 12, 64, 66, 139, 142, 155, 157–158, 170n6, 198–200, 213n3, 217–218, 220, 226–227, 262, 270, 285, 287
- prosociality 2, 66, 67, 69–71, 103, 111, 131n4
- psychology 4, 7–9, 13–15, 35, 35, 40–44, 51–55, 60, 71, 117, 124, 128, 220
- punishment 109, 117, 123, 127, 170n5, 171n12
- race 3, 12–13, 19, 31, 112, 158, 187, 188, 281, 282
- radical otherness xi, xv–xvi, 2–4, 8–11, 13–15, 17–20, 27, 29, 65–71, 78–79, 82, 89, 118, 135–136, 138, 143, 145, 150, 151n1, 156, 164, 168, 174, 187, 199–200, 216, 219, 228, 235–240, 244, 246–249, 250n3, 262, 268–270, 279–280, 282, 284–287
- Raphael, David Daiches 170n11
- reconciliation 17, 87, 137, 150, 182
- refugees 1, 11–12
- reverse inference problem 63–64
- Rizzolatti 245
- Robbins, Joel 188n5
- robots 3, 8, 14–15, 19, 256–270; as moral agents 265; ontology of 263; as relational 256; social presence of 257
- Rosaldo, Renato 148
- Rosenthal, Georg 174
- Rosenthal–von der Pütten, Astrid 66
- Rothberg, Michael 180, 188n8
- rupture 35, 47–50, 55n5
- Russell, Bertrand 130
- Russell–Farnham, Sarah 145
- sacrifice 46, 109, 138, 145–150
- Scarry, Elaine 125, 130
- Scheler, Max 6–7, 10, 198, 202, 281
- Schutz, Alfred 14, 27, 29, 48–49
- science 41–42, 51, 53–55, 156, 216–222, 225–229, 229n1, 230n2, 230n9, 240, 250n3; burden of proof 222; cognitive 1, 4, 62–66, 69, 71, 78, 80, 117, 142, 149, 156, 187, 198, 200, 245, 284–285, 287; and detachment 220–221, 225; neuroscience xii, 5–6, 14–15, 62–64, 235, 238, 240, 244–245, 247–248, 250n12, 263; and objectivity 216, 219, 227; reproducibility 223; social science 229n9, 257; sports science 235, 238, 244–246
- second–person 35, 262–263

- self-other 3–7, 15, 236–239, 245,  
247–249; distinction 60, 64–65; *see*  
*also* I-thou
- sensory 19, 28, 30, 81, 81, 86, 199,  
200, 249, 223, 236, 245, 247–249,  
250n11, 264, 284, 286, 288
- sight 245–246, 248, 251n16
- simulation xi, xii, 5, 6, 70, 110, 155,  
170, 245
- simulationist theory 6
- Skin that I Live In (*La piel que habito*)  
171n12
- Sloan, Cynthia 164, 171n14
- Smith, Adam 17, 155–156, 159–160,  
162, 165, 170n6, 170n10,  
170n11, 281
- Smith, Murray 5, 13, 155, 159,  
119–120, 126, 170n6, 170n10
- Smith, Zadie 13
- social communication 78, 86
- Sommers, Tamler 126–127
- Sopranos, The 119–121, 128–129
- spectators 41, 44, 47, 55n4, 116–121,  
126, 129, 157, 159, 160, 168
- Spinoza, Baruch 284–285
- state sovereignty 136–137, 140,  
146–147
- Stein, Edith 6, 14, 27, 29, 198, 250n2,  
281, 283
- Steiner, Kurt 174
- storytelling xii, 64, 147, 171n16, 202,  
210, 259
- Strauss, Claudia 250n18
- surprise 35, 47–49
- sympathy x–xi, 4, 6, 14, 30, 46, 68, 78,  
129, 154, 158–159, 162, 170n10,  
176, 198, 205, 211, 281, 284–285
- theory of mind xi, 8, 61–62, 69, 71,  
78–80, 82–83, 85–87, 250n3, 260
- Thompson, Evan 244–245
- Thompson, Cheryl 12
- Throop, C. Jason 5, 145, 236, 250n2,  
260, 261, 288
- Throop, C. Jason and Zahavi, Dan 5
- time 238, 241, 243, 244, 246,  
246–249, 256, 257
- Tinbergen, Niko 226
- trauma 37, 83, 144
- triad of impairments 78
- trust xiv, 17, 47, 107, 136, 141,  
143–147, 149–150, 155, 257,  
265–266
- Turkle, Sherry 263–264, 266, 267–269
- Tversky, Amos 117, 128
- Umwelt xv, 15, 223
- Uncanny valley effect 67
- Uncle Tom's Cabin* 12, 125
- unknowing 220, 228
- Valeri, Valerio 207–208, 212
- validity: external 223; internal 223
- Verfremdungseffekte* xiii
- vicarious experiences of nature  
210–212
- visuality 248
- vitality affects 37, 59
- Viveiros de Castro, Eduardo 202, 211,  
212, 251n14
- von Uexküll, Jakob 223
- Waal, Franz de 124, 145–146
- Wallace, George 168
- war 1, 2, 11, 141, 147, 149
- Ward, Tony 127
- Wechselseverstandigung 177
- Weil, Simone 227
- Will and Grace 126
- Willerslev, Rane 247, 251n14
- Williams, Raymond 8
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig 28, 34, 53, 55n1
- Yildiz, Yasemin 180, 188n8
- Young, Iris Marion 88
- Zahavi, Dan 5–7, 27, 37, 101, 178,  
198, 202, 205
- Zerilli, Linda 156
- Zuckerberg, Marc 176





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