

## Being There: On the Imaginative Aspects of Understanding Others and Being Understood

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**Abstract** The empathic work of understanding is often written about as if it depended solely on the emotional, imaginative, or mind reading capabilities of the empathizer. But if it is embedded in an intersubjective encounter that necessitates ongoing dialog for its accuracy, then it implicates the imaginative and emotional capacities of the person to be understood as well. I argue that we should be investigating more actively the ways in which people in different times and places promote or discourage understanding of themselves. [empathy, anthropology, imagination, Toraja, work of empathy]

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### Being There: On the Imaginative Aspects of Understanding Others and Being Understood

In her recent book, *From Detached Concern to Empathy: Humanizing Medical Practice* (2001), Jodi Halpern defines empathy as a first-person-like, *experiential* understanding of another person's perspective. For Halpern, empathy is a type of emotional reasoning in which a person emotionally resonates with the experience of another while simultaneously attempting to imaginatively view a situation from that other person's perspective (2001:85). It is a type of understanding that is neither purely cognitive and imaginative nor purely emotional, but a combination of both—the emotional and experiential part of the response guiding and providing an emotional context for what one imagines about the other's experience, much the way emotion seems to guide and link the images, thoughts, and imaginings in a dream (Halpern 2001:91–92).

Halpern's discussion of empathy is compelling for several reasons. First, she makes clear why empathy is important for understanding others: because it enhances our ability to discern what is salient or otherwise difficult to recognize in another person's emotional communication. It helps us understand, for example, how and why a person is angry, not only that he or she is angry.

Second, Halpern makes clear what empathy is not. It is not detached insight or pure theoretical knowing or the predictions and forecasts, however accurate, of a third-person

observer, all of which might tell us that a person is in a certain kind of emotional state, but not what is salient for the person from within that emotional state nor what that emotional state might feel like from a first-person-like perspective. Nor is it solely an affective merger or identification or attunement with another, as some psychoanalysts have argued, because one may begin to laugh or cry with someone and yet have little understanding about why the other is laughing or crying.

Third, Halpern reminds us—although she does not develop the idea much—that empathy is a process that requires ongoing dialogue for its accuracy. This concern with accuracy, the willingness, indeed the necessity, to alter one's impression of another's emotional state as one engages with the other and learns more about his or her perspective, is what distinguishes empathy from simple projection—the attribution of one's own emotional reactions and perspectives to another (cf. Margulies 1989). Projections may sometimes coincide with the other's emotional state and therefore resemble empathy in certain respects. But more often than not they will not coincide and may themselves become a major source of misunderstanding among people and evidence of the lack of empathy.

What does it mean to say that empathy involves an ongoing intersubjective process? One thing implied is that empathic understanding unfolds over time. One cannot empathize with another until one's imaginings about the other's emotional states and perspectives can be confirmed or disconfirmed in ongoing interaction. Such understanding may in fact come very quickly, especially if one knows a lot about the history and situation of another, but not before the other provides feedback. Further, empathy as process precludes the idea that complete, error-free understanding of another's perspectives can ever be achieved, because people's emotional states and perspectives will fluctuate and change over time—sometimes as a direct result of having been empathically understood. Moreover, what the other experiences as an empathic response in real-time interaction may later come to be remembered as nonempathic and, conversely, what is remembered as an empathic response may originally have been experienced as nonempathic. The empathizer can try to keep up with fluctuations in the other's emotional states, but can never claim to know or capture them once and for all.

### **Imagination and Empathy**

Halpern argues that empathy requires imagination as well as affective attunement. After emotionally engaging with another, one must begin to imagine how and why the other acts or feels the way he or she does. This is an aspect of the empathic process that generates a number of interesting anthropological questions. What enables a person to imagine well and accurately the emotional states and perspectives of another? Are there innate, panhuman aspects to this ability? And if so, how and why are these abilities distributed throughout a population? Or is the empathic imagination necessarily shaped by cultural influences? Can the empathic imagination be purely imaginary, in the sense that the empathizer need not

have undergone what the other experiences to understand it? Is it enough just to “know about” how life is experienced by others? Does a person who shares a number of experiences with another necessarily empathize with that person more accurately than someone who does not?

Halpern suggests that empathic imagination does not operate in a vacuum but, rather, is guided by the empathizer’s emotional engagement with another. This engagement activates an associational network of memories, images, and meanings in the empathizer’s mind that are then mapped onto the experiences and perspectives of the other in an attempt to understand them. The idea that a person’s understanding of another may be furthered, rather than hindered, by his or her own emotional and imaginal reactions to the other is one that is now widely propagated in contemporary psychoanalysis (see, e.g., Natterson 1991; Eagle 1999). But here again, many anthropological questions arise. What is the nature of the affective attunement that guides empathic understanding of another? To what extent is it culturally influenced? How culturally shaped or idiosyncratic are the associational networks it activates? Halpern suggests that it is the affective attunement that guides and provides an emotional context for imagination. But does it work the other way around as well? Could one’s imaginings about another promote or hinder one’s affective attunement with that person?

### **Anthropological Perspectives on Empathy**

I have just proposed that the concept of empathy raises many interesting anthropological questions, but how have anthropologists dealt with empathy to date? Surprisingly, perhaps, not very extensively, especially given the value and significance attributed to conducting face-to-face fieldwork. Although rich and deep discussions of empathy can be found in the Western philosophical tradition (see Throop this issue), only a handful of anthropologists have focused direct attention on it (e.g., Frank 2000 and Strauss 2004).<sup>1</sup> Here, I discuss briefly three of the most significant contributions in the order in which they were written, because later contributions cite or allude to the earlier ones. These are Geertz (1984), Rosaldo (1989), and Wikan (1992).

In his widely cited chapter, “From the Native’s Point of View’: On the Nature of Anthropological Understanding” (1984), Geertz offers a strong critique of the view that understanding another’s point of view involves a special psychological, experiential, perceptual, or transcultural sense. One does not understand others through one’s emotions or senses, which necessarily must remain one’s own, but through grasping the symbols and conceptual systems they use to express themselves to themselves and to others. “The ethnographer does not,” he says, “perceive what his informants perceive. What he perceives, and that uncertainly enough, is what they perceive ‘with’—or ‘by means of,’ or ‘through’ . . . or whatever the word should be” (Geertz 1984:125). Rather than attempting “to place the experience of others within the framework of [one’s own experience and concept of self]” or,

put another way, rather than attribute one's own experiences and understandings to others (projection), "which is what the extolled 'empathy' in fact usually comes down to, understanding them demands setting [one's own experience and conception of self] aside and seeing their experiences within the framework of their own idea of what selfhood is" (Geertz 1984:126). In short,

whatever accurate or half-accurate sense one gets of what one's informants are, as the phrase goes, "really like" does not come from the experience of that acceptance as such which is part of one's own biography, not theirs. It comes from the ability to construe their modes of expression, what I would call their symbol systems, that such an acceptance allows one to work towards developing. Understanding the form and pressure of, to use the dangerous word one more time, natives' inner lives, is more like grasping a proverb, catching an illusion, seeing a joke—or, as I have suggested, reading a poem—than it is like achieving communion. (Geertz 1984:135)

Geertz's warnings here about the dangers of ethnocentrism and projection of one's own feelings and experiences onto others are well taken. But it is also of interest to note how he himself perpetuates the European or North American-like view that cognitive and emotional ways of knowing people can be cleanly separated from one another. As if we can understand people's symbols and meanings apart from the way they are embodied, felt, and experienced. As if our own cognitions and symbols and meanings are not embodied, felt, and experienced (Damasio 1994, 1999).

In "Grief and a Headhunter's Rage," Rosaldo (1989) tells us he initially tried to grasp an Ilongot man's comment that he engaged in headhunting to satisfy his rage born of grief by adopting "the common anthropological assumption that the greatest human import resides in the densest forest of symbols and that analytical detail, or 'cultural depth,' equals enhanced explanation of a culture, or 'cultural elaboration'" (1989:2). His Geertzian-like approach left him with a thick, if detached, description of Ilongot symbols and meanings surrounding funerals and rituals of headhunting, but no closer to a genuine understanding of his informant's comments or of Ilongot experiences of grief and mourning. Only after suffering the loss of his own wife in a fieldwork accident (Rosaldo 1989:9), only after a radical "repositioning" of himself from a person with little direct knowledge and experience of overwhelming grief to one who was only too familiar with it, did he come to grasp the literalness of his informant's comments. Only then could he come to understand "the anger possible in bereavement" (Rosaldo 1989:19) and "the cultural force of emotion" (Rosaldo 1989:2) and personal experience. Rosaldo goes on to argue that "All interpretations [of other people's lives] are provisional; they are made by positioned subjects who are prepared to know certain things and not others. Even when knowledgeable, sensitive, fluent in the language, and able to move easily in an alien cultural world, good ethnographers still have their limits, and their analyses always are incomplete" (Rosaldo 1989:8).

Here, Rosaldo not only asserts that empathic-like understanding entails an emotional, felt component, one that can transcend cultural differences, but implies that it must be modeled on personal experiences that are homologous to the experiences and behaviors we are at-

tempting to understand. One can only understand another's overwhelming grief by having been overwhelmed with grief. One can only understand another's rage by having been enraged oneself.

Wikan cites both Geertz and Rosaldo in her 1992 article, "Beyond the Words: The Power of Resonance." Like Rosaldo, she criticizes Geertz for suggesting that we can gain intimate knowledge of others through thick description and an intellectual knowledge of symbols and meanings alone. She is particularly intent on demonstrating the limitations of a purely language and discourse based approach to understanding others. People do not always say what they mean or feel. People often cannot say what they mean or feel, either because they don't know or because it would be inappropriate. Many things are left unspoken or are self-evident to speakers. Words alone can be misleading, if we take them too literally or if we fail to grasp speakers' intentions and the various social positions from which the words and intentions emanate. Genuine understanding requires that we go beyond discourse and thick description "to refine our ways of attending, thus better to grasp what people are up to, their multiple, compelling concerns, and what is at stake for them, against a backdrop of social relations in which they are engaged, and the resistance life offers to them" (Wikan 1992:467). We do this by attempting to "resonate" with others, "by painstaking engagement on a day-to-day basis in events and routines which are 'theirs' so that we come to share as much as possible in them. Sharing a world with others means learning to attend to it in the same way. Such a practice dispels any mystique of 'resonance' as field technique and epistemology. It is a down-to-earth concept, grounded in practical action" (Wikan 1992:471). Participating in such practical action and resonance involves engaging one's emotions as well as one's observational, analytical, and cognitive powers, much as Wikan's Balinese collaborators suggested to her (Wikan 1992:462–463).

Wikan cites Rosaldo's article approvingly, especially his point that certain kinds of understanding transcend cultural differences. And yet in other respects, her view of empathy and "resonance" differs considerably. For example, Wikan implies, contrary to Rosaldo, that the greatest impediment to empathy is not a lack of correspondence between the empathizer's life experience or "positionality" and that of the person to be understood, but the lack of sufficient practical knowledge of and engagement with the other's position and circumstance in life. This is a much broader, more optimistic view of people's ability to empathize because it rests on their willingness to gain practical knowledge of others rather than on whether or not they share life experiences or positionality with them (Wikan 1992:471).

How do these perspectives on empathy compare to Halpern's? One major difference is that the anthropologists explicitly focus on empathic understanding in a cross-cultural context, on how it might (or might not) be used to bridge cultural boundaries in fieldwork or otherwise. Consequently, they make problematic the imaginative or cognitive side of empathy in a way that Halpern does not. One cannot just rely on one's own store of memories, images, and experiences to imagine the plight of another, especially one from another soci-

ety or culture. Rather, one must, through hard work and effort, gain access to their symbols and meanings (Geertz) or positionality (Rosaldo) or compelling concerns (Wikan) in life. Yet Rosaldo and Wikan would agree with Halpern that empathy entails an emotional component. It is the felt, embodied aspect of empathy that gives us a more first-person-like perspective on another's circumstance, that helps us understand how and why a person feels or experiences what they do, not just that they do.

Wikan perhaps comes closest to Halpern's contention that empathy involves an ongoing intersubjective process. She relates a story of how one of her Muslim Balinese friends had been able to benefit from the advice and treatment of a Hindu Balinese healer in a way that she had not expected, given their cultural and religious differences (Wikan 1992:461–462). In retrospect, she realizes they had been able to “resonate” with one another in a way that transcended their differences. This resonance,

demands something of both parties to communication, of both reader and author: an effort at feeling-thought; a willingness to *engage* with another world, life, or idea; an ability to *use* one's experience—as the Muslim did with the Hindu *balian* [healer]—to try to grasp, or convey, meanings that reside neither in words, “facts,” nor text but are evoked in the meeting of one experiencing subject with another or with a text. (Wikan 1992:463)

This idea that empathy involves “the meeting of one experiencing subject with another” returns me to my dialogue with Halpern, but before going there, I should note that newly emerging research on so called “mirror neurons” suggests that our capacity to feel for others may be much more biologically ingrained than most anthropologists and philosophers have yet imagined (see, e.g., Rizzolatti and Craighero 2004; Carr et al. 2003; Iacoboni et al. 1999). Mirror neurons are those that become activated merely by observing another's actions or behaviors. They are mirrorlike in that they involve many of the same neurons that would be activated were the observer actually to perform or experience the observed actions. This incredible, unintentional capacity of the brain literally to “participate in” or reflect and embody the experience of the other is one of the reasons it becomes important to understand when and how empathic processes become inhibited as well as when and how they are socially and culturally amplified. Although increasing knowledge of the evolution and biology of empathy will, no doubt, revolutionize our current understanding of how it is that people perceive others' emotional and behavioral displays, it will not, of course, of itself deliver us from our struggle to determine the meaning and significance of other people's displays—a critical aspect of the empathic process.

Let me now return to Halpern.

### **Empathy from Whose Point of View?**

Halpern's emphasis on empathy as an intersubjective process that involves imaginative work and ongoing dialog for its accuracy gives us a way of conceptualizing how it differs from

mere projection. And yet she, like most researchers and philosophers of empathy, including both Geertz and Rosaldo, continues to focus on only one-half of the empathic encounter—what it looks like and how it is experienced from the empathizer's point view. But if empathy implies that one has gained a first-person-like understanding of another's experience, who is to be the judge of when and if that is accomplished if not the person we are trying to understand? Of course most of us have experienced moments when we did think someone else knew and understood us better than we knew ourselves. But probably much more common is the experience of others telling or implying to us they know and understand when in fact we know they do not.

I have come to ponder the flip side of what we normally think of as empathy—the imaginative work involved in allowing or imagining oneself to be understood—not only because it is suggested, if not necessitated, by the observation that empathy grows out of an inter-subjective encounter, but also from having struggled for a long time to understand others and be understood in both anthropological and psychoanalytic contexts. As a psychoanalyst, I have many times wondered how my perceptions of an emotional engagement could differ so from the person I was trying to understand. There have been times when I was certain that a comment or gesture of mine had conveyed an empathic awareness of considerable accuracy only to discover later that the other had been oblivious to that comment or gesture. Conversely, there have been other times when people have told me how moved they were by something I said or did when in all honesty, I had been unaware of the impact I was having.

Just recently, for example, a man I have worked with for several years called me early on a Sunday morning. He had just awoken from a terrible dream to find himself sobbing uncontrollably. He was upset by the dream but also by the fact that he couldn't understand why he could be so upset. I said many things that morning, trying to find the words and tone of voice to offer solace. But eventually I said what I thought would be most truthful and helpful in that moment: that he was sad because the reality of his impending divorce was finally hitting home. My words brought immediate cries of "yes!" and more sobbing, but when we talked about this conversation a few days later, it was my practical advice about how to get through the next few days that had brought the most relief for this man and that had convinced him that I really did understand how bad off he was! Note that I never would have known this were it not for the perspective I had as this man's psychotherapist, that allowed me to explore with him our previous encounter. Without such perspective and follow-up, I would have continued believing it was my comments about the impending divorce that had brought the most relief. Which raises the important question: as anthropologists, how often do we have the kind of follow-up data that would allow us to confirm the accuracy of our own alleged empathic observations or those of others?

All of this has made me think more about my own experiences of being understood as well. When people have asked me over the years what my own training analysis was like,<sup>2</sup> I have often said that although my analyst's interpretations were not always on the mark or helpful,

I never doubted that he had my best interests at heart—and that his creation of this enveloping atmosphere of concern was probably the most important and therapeutic thing he did for me. I think I now understand better why I always said that: because it was not so much what my analyst said or did that helped me feel understood, but how he presented those words and gestures to me. He was encouraging me, or allowing me, to imagine him as a person who could understand me.

I see my imaginative efforts at being understood in my fieldwork experiences as well. Here is just one example: It is early in my first trip to Toraja. Jane Wellenkamp and I are hiking across miles of mountainside trying to find a place to live and work. A man whom I refer to as Tandi, offers to guide us to a village located up mountain from where we are. As we begin to walk up a steep, treacherous path, it begins to rain very heavily and before we know it, the trail has turned into a river of mud and slush coming down at us. We are slipping and falling and humiliating ourselves. I am thinking to myself, “it’s hard enough to climb this mountain without having this guy watch us make complete fools of ourselves. I wish he would just go away and let us figure this out on our own.” And sure enough, after a while, Tandi leaves us and heads off up the mountain. We continued our slipping and sliding and falling for at least another hour or so before we finally got to the top of the trail and found Tandi waiting for us. Although I was expecting him to poke fun at us, the way many other Toraja would have, he never said a word. He didn’t laugh. He didn’t snicker. He just told us how and where we might clean up before walking into the next village. I remember thinking at the time and still today, “what a nice and gentle man this is. He knows we are embarrassed and he pretends he doesn’t see how incompetent we are.” But because he and I never discussed this incident, I actually don’t know what he was thinking or how accurately he was seeing the situation from my perspective. What I do know is that, for whatever reason, I was allowed to make of him what I needed in that moment.

### **Illusion and the Sense of Being Understood**

The British psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott writes extensively about the importance of illusion in human life (1965, 1996), especially with regard to how it helps us integrate our subjective sense of inhabiting the world with our objective perceptions of it. He explores how it is we come to invest the world as we find it with personal meaning and significance and feeling, and conversely, how the world as it is presented to us is taken into our subjectivity and sense of being alive—issues that I take to be of central importance to psychocultural anthropologists as well. Winnicott suggests that much of our cultural experience lies in a “transitional space” somewhere between the poles of pure subjectivity and fantasy, on the one hand, and pure, detached perception of an external world, on the other hand. In the transitional space, real cultural objects and people exist and have their own objective characteristics that we perceive and respond to, but it is almost as if we have imagined them into being, so invested with personal meaning and significance have they become. It is the illusion that a world that exists apart from us is really of our own making or



substance that allows us to feel truly alive and integrated; to feel that we are of the world and not just in it. Indeed those who are without a modicum of illusion in this regard may be seriously impaired, according to Winnicott, because they may feel disconnected from the world and other people or dead inside.<sup>3</sup>

I suspect that the empathic process and the sense of being understood is a type of transitional phenomenon, in Winnicott's use of that term. One cannot feel understood unless someone offers real gestures or words of understanding, but the gestures themselves—no matter how accurate from some third-person point of view—do not assure understanding. Rather, those gestures must be met or received by someone who can let them “in” and imagine being understood. If the gestures are offered too insistently or intrusively or if the recipient cannot conceive of a world in which understanding is possible, they will fall on deaf ears and blind eyes. The illusory aspects of empathy help us understand why most of us can feel understood even though we know that from a philosophical point of view, none of us can ever directly know or access another person's experience.

### **Being There**

Some of these ideas might seem familiar to you if you have ever seen the 1979 movie, *Being There*. The movie is based on the novel and screenplay by Jerzy Kosinsky and directed by Hal Ashby: it is a story about a half-witted gardener named Chauncey who has an uncanny ability to make people feel known and understood.<sup>4</sup> Although Chauncey is certainly portrayed as a sympathetic character with almost Christ-like qualities of directness, honesty, and simplicity—for example, he is able to say to a gravely ill man what no one else can or will, “Are you dying now, Ben?”—we also are led to believe that he is truly a dim wit whose social isolation and deprivation have left him profoundly unsophisticated. And yet this basic ignorance about life does not prevent others from finding what they need to find in him: the Washington politicians and power players in need of sage advice find him “balanced,” “direct,” “laconic,” and “brilliant.” A grieving, frustrated, isolated woman in need of love finds that he makes her feel free and safe and releases her desire. Ben, the gravely ill man observes, “there's something about him I trust. He makes me feel better about dying.”

Winnicott would say, I think, that the film beautifully captures the significance of illusion and transitional spaces in human life. For my purposes here, it also demonstrates how and why empathy requires the imagination of someone willing and able to be understood, as well as someone who makes an effort to understand. Chauncey may not be the brightest light in the universe, but it turns out people are sometimes very good at seeking out or entertaining the light of understanding no matter how dim and remote it might be. Of course by saying this, I am not suggesting that Chauncey should be held up as the ideal empathizer. Given his many cognitive and emotional limitations, clearly he is not. But to the other characters in the film in need of empathy and understanding, his limitations do not matter. To them, he seems to understand as no other can or will. This, I suggest, should give us pause.

## Appealing for Help and Concern in Toraja, Indonesia

The characters in *Being There* who find in Chauncey what they long for despite his profound deficiencies illustrate well one end of an empathic continuum, the one where the need to be understood is so powerful that it can imaginatively transform most any gesture into a caring or concerned one. Such moments tell us a lot about what kinds of situations leave people feeling most exposed, vulnerable, and unsupported—situations that will vary by culture. In the U.S. film *Being There*, the characters in most desperate need of understanding and comfort face impending death, loss of love, and the continuing need for love into middle age and beyond, and loss of power, prestige, and status. At the other extreme of the continuum are those who dare not imagine that others can be helpful or understanding, no matter what their words or gestures, for fear of harm or disappointment. Winnicott himself and many other psychoanalysts, psychiatrists, and anthropologists (see, e.g., Throop this issue; Groark this issue; Hollan 2008) have described the kind of experiences that might lead people to withdraw from others or become indifferent to them. People who have felt repeatedly violated, intruded on, deceived, or manipulated often find it very difficult to imagine being understood and recognized by others, no matter what the circumstances. Somewhere between these two extremes is where much of the intersubjective work of empathy unfolds, in the transitional space between those who seek to understand and those who can still imagine being understood.

Because I am proposing we complement our studies of when and how people understand others with those that investigate when and why people seek to be understood, let me now turn to a brief discussion of the latter with some material from the Toraja highlands of Sulawesi in Indonesia.<sup>5</sup> The point I want to underscore is that our ability accurately to understand and empathize with others depends very much on whether others want or allow us to understand, whether they give us the appropriate cues for understanding. As Anthony Wallace pointed out long ago (1961), much of social life goes on without intimate knowledge of others' motives and intentions, through habit, routine, common expectation, and widely shared rules of social engagement and etiquette.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, as Wellenkamp and I have written (1994, 1996) and as both Groark and Throop suggest in this issue, people often have good reason for wanting to conceal their feelings and intentions from others, rather than expose them or make them available for observation and interpretation. In Toraja, for example, where people are supposed to be generous and emotionally calm and balanced, they loathe to admit or expose feelings of greediness, anger, or resentment. If this is so, then we need to ask when and why people actually need to participate in others' feelings and ideas and when and why they do not? And further, we need to recognize that the kinds of problems and situations people want recognized and understood and the ways in which they seek that recognition will be socially and culturally specific. As we shall see in a moment, the needs of peasant farmers embedded in a system of feasting and reciprocal exchange are quite different than those of the white, wealthy, upper class people that Chauncey encounters in Washington, D.C. And their ways of expressing those needs are different as well.

Life in rural Toraja villages is organized around the cultivation of wet rice fields and gardens, the formation and perpetuation of families (bilateral and neolocal), the attempt to preserve a hierarchy among higher status people, commoners, and dependents, and the propitiation of powerful numinous beings, including the Christian God and a variety of other spirits and ancestral beings—all of whom can have a direct influence on people's lives (see Hollan 1996; Hollan and Wellenkamp 1994, 1996). All of these social activities involve a high degree of cooperation and reciprocal exchange among people: landowners need the landless to cultivate their fields while the landless need opportunities for work; the staging of elaborate funerals and other communal feasts, during which the spirit world is honored and placated and social distinctions are made most visible and clearly marked, requires a complicated system of debt and return; young children are dependent on the care and nurturance of their parents and other caretakers while older people rely on the help of their adult children; and so on.

What makes all this interdependency and reciprocity possible? Why and how are people motivated to participate? There is, of course, a pragmatic side involved. Given the nature of the system, people know that if they don't cooperate with others, others, including the gods and ancestors, will not cooperate with them. There is widespread discourse and gossip on what happens to people who do not honor their obligations and responsibilities to others: they are mistrusted, despised, ostracized, and punished by spiritual beings. Ironically, of course, it is just such sanctions against unfair and unjust behaviors that lead people to want to conceal their intentions and feelings from others at times. And the awareness of this, in turn, contributes to a widespread sense that appearances can be deceptive, that people are rarely what they appear to be, and that their inner most thoughts and feelings can be difficult, if not impossible, to read (Hollan and Wellenkamp 1994:147; see also Throop this issue; Groark this issue).

But exchange is so deeply embedded in Toraja, so both constitutive and symbolic of relationship, that there are strong moral and emotional aspects to it as well. You honor your obligations and responsibilities because, in essence, you feel you can't do anything else. Not to honor them would harm, humiliate, and anger others and literally shame and sicken oneself.

Wellenkamp and I have noted that one aspect of self-experience that grows out of this organization of life is the sense of feeling vulnerable to or acted on by other humans and outside forces (Hollan and Wellenkamp 1994:94–96). There are several layers to this sense of vulnerability. Within Indonesia, the Toraja have long feared domination by their more numerous Muslim neighbors, the Bugis and Makassar, and they have long been disparaged as a relatively backward, primitive people who waste enormous amounts of money and livestock in their elaborate funerals and feasting ceremonies—despite the fact that it is these very ceremonies that have brought them so much tourist and international attention. Then too, many people feel entrapped and oppressed, literally consumed, by the very family and exchange systems they rely on so heavily. Even higher status people, for

example, occasionally dream of themselves as sacrificial animals being carved up, butchered, and eaten in just the way buffalo are killed, distributed, and consumed at funerals (Hollan and Wellenkamp 1994:182–189). People are also deeply aware of how vulnerable they are to spiritual and ancestral forces, which can be harsh and unpredictable.

People feel especially vulnerable and in need of understanding when overwhelmed by their duties or responsibilities to others and when their own needs go neglected or unfulfilled. In both instances, people can feel deep shame: in the first instance, the shame of letting others down, of proving oneself incapable of fulfilling one's obligations, in the second, the shame of social invisibility and insignificance. Note that both types of vulnerability are directly linked to people's involvement in and dependency on a system of reciprocal exchange.

What do people do when feeling vulnerable and exposed in these ways? One option in certain contexts is to bring attention to one's plight through what Wellenkamp and I refer to as a discourse of persuasion, coaxing, and appeal. As Schieffelin notes, "appeal" exerts its force "through the evocation of a sentimental intimacy, pathos, and compassion" (1985:112). It conveys respect and humility and is an especially appropriate mode of interacting with and influencing social superiors. By presenting oneself as needy, helpless, or disadvantaged in some way, one openly solicits the help and understanding of others. Although people can and do use this rhetoric and presentation of self in manipulative and coercive ways, it is also recognized as a completely legitimate and morally justified way of informing others of one's circumstances. As such, its effectiveness depends, as Schieffelin notes, on its power to evoke the caring responses of others. For most Toraja, seeing a person in need, especially a person appealing for help, evokes a powerful feeling of love–compassion–pity for that person. This "love" and concern for the other resembles in some respects what English speakers refer to as empathy.<sup>7</sup> One participates in the circumstances and feelings of the other, one is moved by the other's plight, and one takes action to help. One cannot do otherwise. Many parents say, for example, they can resist their children's entreaties only so long; if children persist in their appeals or if they appear inconsolable, what can one do? One must oblige.

When appeal is ineffective, however, either because one is perceived as being deceitful or manipulative or because others remain unresponsive or oblivious, one's sense of vulnerability and shame can become even more acute. When this happens, people are sometimes driven by their shame and anger to ever more desperate and alarming forms of behavior. For example, children may run away from home when their appeals for help or relief go unanswered (Hollan and Wellenkamp 1996:46–49). And adolescents have been known to threaten or commit suicide, especially when denied continued educational assistance (Hollan 1990).

I should underscore again that legitimate appeals for aid and assistance are viewed as normal and justified. Without the least bit of shame or embarrassment, even adults tell stories of reaching a state of desperation, "crying" for help, receiving help, and then feeling appreciated and vindicated as a result. Here, then, is the flip side to what we normally think of as

empathy: the ways in which people assist or allow our understanding of them through explicit or implicit cues. In a face-to-face society highly reliant on reciprocal exchange, such as Toraja, these cues for understanding can be fairly straightforward in many contexts. For the most part, people know a lot about each other's lives. They know in advance who has legitimate needs and who does not. And because people do not have to hide many of their needs nor feel ashamed of them, they can be displayed rather openly or even advertised at times.

Although the discourse of appeal I have described for the Toraja is unusually explicit in its way of seeking understanding and concern, it should give us pause about our own tendency to assume that empathy requires unusual powers of discernment—whether of symbols and meanings, positionality, or resonance. Empathy as exceptional discernment presumes that we cannot expect much help from those we are trying to empathize with, that they will be unwilling or unable to foster our understanding of them. This, in fact, may be a safe presumption to make in a society where people are disconnected from one another, ignorant about the basic circumstances of each other's lives, and ashamed of appearing weak or incompetent or dependent. But is it a safe assumption to make otherwise, especially in places more like Toraja? Or should we be investigating more actively the ways in which people in different times and places promote or discourage understanding of themselves?

## Conclusion

The empathic work of understanding is often written about as if it depended solely on the emotional, imaginative, or mind reading capabilities of the empathizer. But if it is embedded in an intersubjective encounter that necessitates ongoing dialog for its accuracy, then it implicates the imaginative and emotional capacities of the person to be understood as well. When and how do people allow themselves to be understood? When and how do they resist understanding by others? How does the need or desire for understanding vary by culture, socioeconomic status, gender, age, and so on? It is well and good for anthropologists to think about how we attempt to empathize with others, but it might be even more important for us to know how others imagine or allow themselves to be known and understood.

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## Notes

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empathy have inspired and complemented my own. Part of this article was presented in the panel “Empathy, Ethnography, and Experience” at the Biennial Meetings of the Society for Psychological Anthropology in San Diego, CA, April 7–10, 2005.

1. Frank (2000:97) includes Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict among those who have developed a “tradition of empathy” in U.S. anthropology. I would argue, however, that this “tradition” has always been more implicit than explicit and that the concept of empathy per se in anthropology has been left woefully undeveloped.
2. Psychoanalysis is the only psychotherapeutic practice that requires the analyst–therapist to undergo his or her own analysis before graduating and becoming certified as a “psychoanalyst.” The primary purpose is to help analysts better understand, if not resolve, their own internal conflicts so that they are better able to understand and work with the conflicts of others. Secondly, the process promotes empathy for patients by teaching analysts, through their own experience, how difficult and embarrassing it can be to expose oneself to another.
3. Winnicott spent much of his psychoanalytic practice working with such “disillusioned” people, and many of his therapeutic approaches were meant to counterbalance and overcome this disillusion.
4. In the movie, Chauncey’s real name is Chance. After losing the only home he has ever known, he meets a woman who asks him his name. He replies, “Chance the gardener,” referring to the work he used to perform. But she hears him say, “Chauncey Gardiner,” which is the name he is called for the rest of the movie.
5. For a more complete discussion of the varieties and vicissitudes of empathy in Toraja, see Hollan 2008.
6. In all cultures there are many contexts in which what matters are not people’s feelings or intentions, but their concrete actions.
7. To “love” someone (*ma`pakaboro*, *ma-mali lako*) “means to be concerned about their welfare and to feel sorry for them and have compassion (*mamase*) for them in times of need. It also means to be accustomed to their presence and to think about them and yearn for them (*ma`inaa-naa*) when they are away” (Hollan and Wellenkamp 1994:57).

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