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# Emerging Issues in the Cross-Cultural Study of Empathy

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## Abstract

Especially since the discovery of mirror neurons, scholars in a variety of disciplines have made empathy a central focus of research. Yet despite this recent flurry of interest and activity, the cross-cultural study of empathy in context, as part of ongoing, naturally occurring behavior, remains in its infancy. In the present article, I review some of this recent work on the ethnography of empathy. I focus especially on the new issues and questions about empathy that the ethnographic approach raises and the implication of these for the study of empathy more generally.

## Keywords

anthropology, cross-cultural study, empathy, Pacific region

Especially since the discovery of so-called “mirror neurons” (Iacoboni, 2008), scholars in a variety of disciplines, including philosophy (Kogler & Stueber, 2000; Stueber, 2006), medicine (Farrow & Woodruff, 2007; Halpern, 2001), psychotherapy (Bohart & Greenberg, 1997), evolutionary science (de Waal, 2009), and neuroscience (Decety & Ickes, 2009) have made empathy a central focus of research. Yet despite this recent flurry of interest and activity, the cross-cultural study of empathy *in context*, as part of ongoing, naturally occurring behavior, remains in its infancy (Hollan & Throop, 2008, 2011a). In the present article, I review some of this recent work on the ethnography of empathy. I focus especially on the new issues and questions about empathy that the ethnographic approach raises and the implication of these for the study of empathy more generally.

## The Importance of an Ethnographic Study of Empathy

The discovery of so-called “mirror” neurons—neurons that become activated merely upon observation of another’s goal-directed actions or behaviors and involving many of the same networks of neurons that would fire if the observer were to actually perform or experience the observed actions—have led researchers in a number of disciplines to begin rethinking what we think we know about the biological, social, and experiential

bases of human sociality and cooperativeness, the hallmark of our species. Indeed, many cognitive scientists, neuroscientists, and evolutionary psychologists would now argue that automatic, biologically based, embodied forms of imitation and attunement, such as the mirror neuron system, emotional contagion, and the recognition of facial expressions, are far more central to human culture and behavior than we have previously imagined. It is these evolved capacities, in contrast to more language-bound conscious or rational calculation, that allow us to evaluate and to adjust to each other’s behavior as easily and quickly as we do. We see the rapid breathing, flushed face, and squinted eyes of others and “know” they are angry without even having to think about it. And we make this same rapid assessment of many other emotional and intentional states as well.

These new observations and understandings of bodily attunements and resonances accord well with so-called “simulation” theories of empathy (Kogler & Stueber, 2000), the idea that we can understand others’ emotional and intentional states because we automatically enact and approximate the perspective of others by means of our evolved embodied senses and perceptions. And yet how is this possible, when we know human behavior varies so much across time, cultures, and individuals? We may know from the rapid breathing, flushed face, and squinted eyes that someone might be angry, but depending on where we are and when, that anger might be motivated by shame, frustration, hostility, or any of a number of other possible emotional states. We can sort through

these various possibilities only by knowing a great deal about the angry person's personal and cultural background—who he is, where he comes from, how he expects to be treated versus how he is currently being treated, his past history of relationship with us or with the people he is interacting with, and so on. Such background knowledge is essential to knowing and understanding people and to predicting their behavior accurately. It is what allows us to know *why* a person is angry, not just that they *are* angry (Halpern, 2001). It is also why so-called “theory” theorists would argue that first-person perspective taking must necessarily involve more rational calculation and cognitively mediated processing than most simulation theorists would admit (Kogler & Stueber, 2000).

Part of the problem here is what we mean by “empathy.” If empathy is merely the capacity to detect in a visceral or perceptual way when another is in a certain emotional state or involved in a certain goal-directed behavior, that is one thing. Then we are being empathic when we recognize immediately that a person about to pick up a fork is likely to eat. But if empathy is what it takes to know that the person picking up the fork is doing so not out of hunger, but only to avoid upsetting or shaming an obliging host, that is something else again. The second type of empathy may grow out of and be dependent upon the visceral and perceptual mechanisms enabling the first, but its full realization also requires knowledge that is more sensitive to situation and context, and also more prone to misinterpretation and error. That person picking up the fork to eat may not be doing it out of respect for his host after all, but out of contempt, to demonstrate that he will enact the right and proper behaviors even when he may strongly contest the host's very right to organize a feast or dinner in the first place!

Clearly these are two different meanings of the term “empathy,” one having to do with the most basic, nonconscious ways in which the human body orients itself and reacts to the world and to other bodies, and the other having to do with a more conscious awareness of and engagement with other bodies and people. Yet they are often confused or elided in the contemporary literature. One exception to this is Stueber (2006), who argues that we conceive of empathy as a complex process involving both “basic” and “reenactive” parts. For Stueber, basic empathy entails all those sensory and perceptual mechanisms that allow us to determine *that* another person is angry, sad, elated, or in some other emotional or intentional state. Reenactive empathy, in contrast, refers to all other cognitive, emotional, and imaginative capacities that allow us to use our own first-person, folk psychological knowledge and experience as actors to model and understand the experience of others. Significantly, the concept of reenactive empathy emphasizes the doubly culturally- and historically-bound nature of complex empathic awareness and knowledge: that is, the fact that the subjects of our empathy are people who think, act, and feel in very specific culturally and historically constituted moral worlds while we ourselves, as empathizers, are similarly bound and constrained. Given the challenges this poses for accurate understanding of others' behavior, especially in a cross-cultural context, Stueber discusses at some length the fallibility and limitations of complex empathic knowledge and indicates why it can never be as rote and automatic as some simulation

theorists would suggest (Stueber, 2006, pp. 195–218)—an important point that is often either ignored or underemphasized in the contemporary literature.

Stueber's distinction, while only heuristic, is an important one because it draws attention to the complexity of the empathic process, including the many ways in which it can go wrong, and opens up a conceptual space for us to examine the ways in which “basic,” evolved capacities to attend and to attune to other people and minds becomes culturally elaborated and expressed or suppressed in specific social and moral contexts. I use this distinction throughout the rest of this article. However, because I think the term “reenactive” suggests a literalness to the simulation process that is unwarranted by our current understanding of it, I will instead use “complex empathy” to contrast with basic empathy. Complex empathy refers to our more or less conscious attempts to know and understand why other people act in the way they do. Such understanding of others' behavior is certainly dependent on all of the basic processes of intersubjectivity discussed before, but is both more conscious and more fallible than basic empathy.

In the remainder of the article, I discuss some of the emerging issues and questions that the new ethnographic study of complex empathy is raising, and I draw out the implications of these for the study of empathy more generally. I focus especially on work that Jason Throop and I have collected and edited recently (Hollan & Throop, 2011b; Throop & Hollan, 2008), though I bring these studies into conversation with other recent work (e.g., Decety & Ickes, 2009; Farrow & Woodruff, 2007) as well.

## What *Is* Empathy in a Cross-Cultural Context?

Formal definitions of empathy usually note that it is a way of assessing what another person is thinking, feeling, or doing from a quasi first-person point of view, and that it includes both emotional and cognitive aspects. Some suggest that it is the emotional, experiential part of the response that guides and provides a context for what one imagines about the other's experience, in much the way that emotion seems to guide and link the images, thoughts, and imaginings in a dream (Halpern, 2001, pp. 91–92). Such definitions also usually note that although empathy entails an emotional resonance between the empathizer and the object of empathy, it also is characterized by the maintenance of a clear cognitive and experiential boundary between the two, such that the empathizer can always distinguish between her own thoughts and feelings and those of the other. For some, this is what distinguishes empathy from sympathy, compassion, or some form of emotional contagion. Further, many formal definitions of empathy emphasize its moral “neutrality,” that is, the fact that it can be used to hurt others as well as to help them—although a few, such as de Waal (2009, pp. 115–117), imply that it is an essentially altruistic impulse or response, unless or until it is suppressed or inhibited in some way. Harris also promotes this view, claiming, “The consequences of empathy are compassionate behavior towards others, moral agency and ethical behavior based on mercy and justice” (2007, p. 169).

Recent ethnographic work suggests that while many people around the world identify and label forms of social knowing and assessment that closely resemble this definition of empathy, very few have concepts that are identical to it. One area of significant overlap is in the idea that first-person perspective taking involves a blending of both emotional resonance and imagination (Feinberg, 2011; Hollan, 2011; Lohmann, 2011; Mageo, 2011; Throop, 2011). Such a finding is not all that surprising, however, given how few people outside the Euro-American context attempt to make or maintain the sharp distinction between “thinking” and “feeling” that many Westerners do (Lutz, 1988; Wikan, 1992).

Beyond this, however, things get murky. For example, there seem to be many places in the world, especially in the Pacific region, where empathic-like responses shade much more closely, both semantically and behaviorally, to what English speakers would refer to as “love,” “compassion,” “sympathy,” “pity,” or some combination of these states (Hollan & Throop, 2011a). In the eastern Indonesian society of Toraja, terms suggesting feelings of “empathy,” but translating more literally as “love-compassion-pity,” often imply a strong sense of identification with the subject of attention, such that one feels moved to intervene and help, as if one had no other choice (Hollan 2011; Hollan & Wellenkamp, 1994). Such responses resemble in some respects the evolved altruistic impulses that de Waal (2009) posits. They also indicate how difficult it can be for people, at least in certain contexts, to establish or maintain the clear sense of separateness from the subject of concern that is supposed to be a hallmark of empathy. Indeed, they raise the more general issue of whether “empathy” per se is ever found as a relatively pure, isolated experience, or whether in fact it is an awareness that must be carved out of other closely related social sentiments, with boundaries that remain semantically and behaviorally fuzzy and open to cultural and symbolic mediation.

The sense that one feels impelled to “do” something with one’s understanding and concern for others is another way in which notions of “empathy” in Pacific societies, and in many other places as well, differ from its academic conception as a relatively “neutral” understanding or awareness of others’ thoughts and feelings. In such places, empathy is expressed more as an active doing or performing than as a passive experiencing. The proof of one’s empathic response is in one’s action or inaction with regard to the subject of empathy, not in one’s mere understanding, no matter how accurate or sensitive that understanding might be. Material exchanges of various kinds, including exchanges of labor and service (Feinberg, 2011; Hollan, 2011; Mageo, 2011; Throop, 2011; von Poser, 2011), often play a large part in such pragmatic displays. Nonparticipation in them may indicate not only a failure to understand the other’s plight, but an indifference to or contempt of it as well.

The implication that one will use or “do” something with one’s understanding—or misunderstanding (Hollan, 2008)—of another may be one of the primary reasons why so many people in the world seem to be as wary of first-person perspective taking as they are embracing of it (Hollan & Throop, 2008; Robbins & Rumsey, 2008). This is certainly true of the Pacific region (Hollan & Throop, 2011b), where in order to protect “the right

to be the first person of one’s own thoughts” (Keane, 2008), people often claim that it is or should be difficult, if not impossible, to know or understand another person’s mind. But it is true of many other parts of the world as well, including some Mayan areas of highland Mexico (Groark, 2008), where people fear that others may use empathic-like knowledge in magical ways to cause physical harm or even death. The Inuit of Northern Canada, in contrast, worry not that empathy will be used to cause physical harm, but rather to shame and humiliate, sometimes for the ostensible purpose of teaching people how to behave properly (Briggs, 2008). Such widespread fear and wariness of empathic-like knowledge challenges its conception as an essentially altruistic response to others, or at the very least, demonstrates that if its roots are in altruism, its consequences may end in harm rather than in benefit to others.

From an ethnographic perspective, then, complex empathy is never “neutral,” but rather is always found embedded in a moral context, which affects both its likelihood and means of expression, and its social, emotional, and even its political and economic, consequences.

## Empathy by Whom and for Whom?

De Waal (2009) conceives of empathy as an evolved response of approach and concern for others. The response begins with an emotional resonance between the potential empathizer and a fellow, followed by the empathizer’s perspective taking on the other’s situation. It is the perspective taking that enables the empathizer, under certain circumstances, to provide a helping or care-taking gesture. Although de Waal emphasizes how fast and automatic this response is, he at the same time argues, sometimes in a somewhat contradictory way, that it is also easily shaped and molded by social cues, such that it is generally targeted towards the welfare of “family, friends, and partners” (p. 115). We can learn to inhibit or override the automatic nature of the empathic response, in the same way that we can learn to control the otherwise automatic nature of our respiration (p. 79), and we can also learn to “regulate it at its very source by means of selective attention and identification” (p. 80):

... even though we identify easily with others, we don’t do so automatically. For example, we have a hard time identifying with people whom we see as different or belonging to another group. We find it easier to identify with those like us—with the same cultural background, ethnic features, age, gender, job, and so on—and even more so with those close to us, such as spouses, children, and friends. (de Waal, 2009, p. 80)

In the next paragraph, de Waal then suggests that just as “identification” can release the empathic process, “the absence of identification closes that door” (2009, p. 80) and turns off or inhibits the response. This passage illustrates nicely not only how complex the empathic process is thought to be—involving responses that ostensibly are both highly automatic *and* sensitive to social context—but also demonstrates the conceptual slippage that can occur between what I have referred to as “basic” and “complex” empathy. For although de Waal implies that the automatic and socially sensitive part of the response is relatively seamless and

unproblematic, nowhere does he actually define what “identification” or “lack of identification” is or identify and analyze the specific social mechanisms through which we come to identify (and empathize) with some people but not others.

Mageo (2011) shares with de Waal the idea that empathy is an evolved process, but she argues that it becomes realized specifically through attachment mechanisms and behaviors, which are themselves highly sensitive to enculturation practices. She compares and contrasts attachment behavior in Samoa and in the USA, demonstrating how attachment is directed outwards to family and community in Samoa, while in the USA, to a much more limited set of intimates. She argues that empathy flows along and through these patterns of attachment and kinship, and that it is through these flows of empathy that important boundaries between groups are constructed and maintained, including class and status distinctions (see also Hermann, 2011; Throop, 2011). Mageo’s argument shares with de Waal the idea that empathy is usually directed towards the in-group, however defined, and withheld from out-groups, but in contrast to him, she identifies a specific set of social mechanisms through which this targeting is achieved.

Although both de Waal and Mageo (de Waal, 2009; Mageo, 2011) point in the direction of the cultural and social mediation of empathic processes, neither discusses how such mediation might be used to *expand* the flow of empathy among people and beings or what types of factors might interfere with its flow and expression, even within the in-group. Hermann (2011) examines the first issue in her study of empathy and ethnicity among Banabans in Fiji. She argues that as a result of a history of colonization, Christianization, and displacement, Banabans have made the idea of empathy and compassion a central aspect of their ethnic identity, representing themselves not only as a people who take “pity” on others, whether Banaban or not, but also as a group entitled to the pity of others, including that of non-Banabans most especially. Hermann uses historical data to illustrate how empathic-like ideas and behaviors can be used over time to bridge and connect groups as well as separate them. But she goes further and argues that expressions of empathy are always embedded in historical and transcultural processes that make any overly naturalized, static conceptions of them untenable.

The cultural mediation of empathy is also evident in its extension outward to include other nonhuman animals and numinous beings of various kinds. As Lohmann (2011) points out, the empathic imagination can be directed towards any being or entity one presumes to be mind-bearing. This is evident in many cultural and religious systems around the world, including the Pacific region (Feinberg, 2011; Hollan, 2011; Lepowsky, 2011; Mageo & Howard, 1996). Feinberg (2011) notes, for example, that Anutans traditionally “might imagine themselves in the position of a spirit and attempt, on that basis, to predict how spirits are likely to react to various stimuli” (p. 160). But most often, “their concern was to persuade spirits to empathize (and sympathize) with them,” (p. 160) by

... performing worship ceremonies, offering food and drink, and speaking to spirits in ways that emphasized, even exaggerated, their own pitiable state. The hope was that the gods or spirits would use their superhuman power to assist the worshippers by ensuring health, prosperity, and safety from foreign invasion. (Feinberg, 2011, p. 160)

Such imaginary extensions of empathy raise the issue of just how far empathy can be carried beyond its “basic,” viscerally based components. De Waal argues that true empathy “needs a face” (2009, p. 83). It “builds on proximity, similarity, and familiarity, which is entirely logical given that it evolved to promote in-group cooperation” (p. 221). He suggests that while we are “certainly capable of feeling for others based on hearing, reading, or thinking about them,” our “concern based purely on the imagination lacks strength and urgency” (p. 221). Preston reaches a similar conclusion, noting that imaginary objects require more neural activation to be held in working memory than do actually perceived ones (2007, p. 429). As a result, “the strength of activation in imagined empathy is rarely as high as in direct empathy because of the increased difficulty in attending to internal over external stimuli” (p. 430).

Both views are certainly plausible, resting on the assumption that empathy evolved to help manage real-time interactions with other live humans. But because neither examines imaginary empathy in context, they remain speculative. What we need here is more ethnographic work in a variety of contexts focusing explicitly on comparisons of face-to-face versus imaginary empathy, especially given how much evidence we have that imaginatively extended forms of complex empathy, including beliefs in numinous beings of various kinds, remain vital to human life. Such work would allow us to assess the relative cognitive and motivational salience of different types of empathy, and to examine not only the ways in which empathy is extended through relatively pure forms of faith or imagination alone, but also through embodied practices and rituals that embed and stimulate imagination in a variety of very concrete sensory and perceptual experiences. Through such practices, numinous beings are given a “face,” albeit one that differs from flesh and blood.

The fact that culturally mediated social practices can turn basic empathy on or off and can direct its focus to larger or more restricted groups of people or beings, means that we still have much to learn about how empathy functions in everyday life. Given also the many examples of organized violence, torture, and genocide we find in the world today, it seems especially important that we understand better how empathy for others can be turned off or used to harm rather than help. A growing body of literature on the anthropology of violence (e.g., Daniel, 1996; Das, 2007; Hinton, 2005; Kleinman, Das, & Locke, 1997; Robben & Suarez-Orozco, 2000) examines the various ways in which people learn how to dis-identify from or dehumanize others, but little of this focuses on the suppression or inhibition of empathy *per se*. One exception is Scheper-Hughes (1992), who examines how women and mothers in very impoverished areas of Brazil learn to detach from starving, near-death infants so that very limited material and emotional resources can be redirected towards those more likely to survive. Although Scheper-Hughes warns against any easy notion of empathy as a “natural” display of concern or altruism, she is also careful to distinguish between what may appear to be a lack of empathy and empathy that is displayed in only very carefully controlled and restricted ways (p. 413).

Throop and I have noted (Hollan & Throop, 2008, 2011a) the widespread fear that empathic-like knowledge will be

inaccurate or used to harm rather than to help. Often this fear is of other members of the in-group, those who are most likely to have either direct or indirect access to potentially damaging or hurtful information about oneself or intimates. Yet people are sometimes fearful such knowledge will be collected and used against them by outsiders as well, as in cases of psychological warfare or “dirty” political campaigns. Bubandt (2008) has recently reported how individuals from a Muslim group in North Maluku (eastern Indonesia) forged a letter from the head of a local Christian church, in which the Christian leader ostensibly encourages his membership to engage in a pogrom against a local Muslim group in order to divide the Muslim population on Maluku and so “pave the way for a Christian takeover of North Maluku and, eventually, the whole eastern part of Indonesia” (p. 554). The motive behind this forgery, apparently, was not to incite Christian violence against Muslims, but rather the reverse. It seems to have been an attempt to scare the Muslim population of Maluku into a united, violent front against local Christians in order to maintain Muslim political and economic power on the island. But this is accomplished by first empathizing with the worries and concerns of the Christian community so that the forged letter gains a certain degree of plausibility and authenticity. Bubandt uses the forged letter to suggest why and how groups sometimes attempt to empathize with their enemies, in order to gain knowledge or insight that may then ultimately be used to thwart or undermine them.

I disagree with Bubandt’s interpretation of this forged letter, since I think it demonstrates not empathy for Maluku Christians and their motivations, but rather a slanderous caricature of them. If there is empathy here, it is for other Muslims in the community who might also be feeling alienated, disempowered, and resentful of Christian gains. The letter taps into this reservoir of resentment and worry, suggesting that Christians on Maluku really are as deceitful and manipulative as some Muslims might fear. But in any case, Bubandt does illustrate well just how dangerous empathic-like knowledge can be and why it is sometimes not at all obvious who is demonstrating empathy and for whom—yet another reason why the ethnographic investigation of empathy is so important.

## The Vicissitudes of Empathy

While cultural and historical factors may affect the degree to which a community values and encourages the expression of empathy (or not) in certain contexts or situations, actual displays may be much more contingent, depending not only on a person’s overall tendency to empathize with others (so-called “trait” empathy) but on a variety of other mediating variables, including the political and economic ones emphasized by Scheper-Hughes (1992). Nezlek, Schutz, Lopez, and Smith (2007) highlight this point by investigating how people’s actual feelings and expressions of empathy vary independently of their overall trait empathy through the course of a day and over time. They report that among the U.S. Americans they studied, day-to-day displays of empathy varied considerably depending on such things as a person’s mood, the number of people they were interacting with,

momentary levels of self-esteem, and type of activity engaged in (whether “social” or achievement related). They conclude by suggesting 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” (p. 197) 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” (p. 198).

This call for more studies of the complex and dynamic interrelationship between trait or dispositional, and expressed empathy is a significant one. Many of the ethnographic studies cited before advance our understanding of the kinds of values, moral contexts, and situational factors affecting and mediating expressed empathy, but very few of them examine how a person’s overall dispositional or developed tendency to empathize or not interacts with such factors. One exception is my own recent work among the Toraja (Hollan, 2011), in which I examine how people whose developmental histories I knew well—through person-centered interviewing and observational techniques (Hollan, 2001; Levy & Hollan, 1998)—tended to empathize or not in culturally expected ways. One man, for example, who had suffered various hardships in his youth including failed work ventures and near starvation, was generous and empathic even with people who were not, from a Toraja point of view, obviously deserving of such help. He did this, in part, because he seemed to identify with people who were struggling in the same way he once had. In contrast, another man, relatively prosperous and high status by local standards, only grudgingly extended to others the empathy and material resources he properly owed them. Not only had he become cynical of the many people who had attempted to take advantage of his obligation as a wealthier, higher status person to nurture and to protect, but he had developed a more generalized wariness of other people that extended back into his childhood, was reinforced during a period of political unrest in South Sulawesi, and which often gained expression in his dreams.

There were patterns to these men’s expressions of complex empathy, but they were ones that could be discerned only by knowing both what was culturally expected of them, given their respective positions in the social system, and the developmental experiences they had had that led each to experience, receive, and express empathy in relatively characteristic ways. It is exactly this kind of complexity and contingency that a fine-grained ethnographic approach can capture so well, and why, therefore, such an approach is so valuable to the study of empathy more generally. Only such an approach can capture not only the vicissitudes of empathy in the flow of ongoing, naturally occurring behavior, but also help explain why in any cultural context, there will always be some people who are likely to empathize more and some less.

## Varieties of Empathic Discernment

Researchers in a variety of disciplines now argue that the human capacity to empathize is a deeply embodied one. And yet to date, much of this work has underscored only the types of

emotional resonance generated by vision, such as when people become emotionally aroused or affected by others' facial expressions or as when mirror neurons are fired in response to the visual observation of others' goal-directed behavior. Only recently has work on mirror neurons begun to investigate how and when the simulation of goal-directed activity may also be triggered by the sounds that accompany such activity (Gallese, 2007). The study of sound in generating empathy, though rarely focused upon, also plays a part in some of Ickes' work (Mast & Ickes, 2007) on empathic accuracy. For example, Mast and Ickes asked participants to attempt to infer the thoughts and feelings of three videotaped women as they interacted with their therapists based on both the combined video and audio portions of the recording, on the video portion alone, and on the audio portion alone. Not surprisingly, results demonstrated that empathic accuracy was highest when participants could both see and hear the interactions. Interestingly, though, when participants were limited to seeing or hearing alone, their empathic accuracy was much higher when they could hear the interactions as opposed to when they could only see them.

Presuming for the moment that this better accuracy was based not only on what was literally said in the interactions, but also on the sound and quality of the way it was being said, we could infer that tone and quality of voice might be another important modality through which we detect and resonate with the thoughts and feelings of others, especially in cultures that draw attention to such audio cues. Yet few have examined in a focused way how cultures and individuals may differentially engage and utilize the body and its senses in the construction and nurturing of empathic responses—this despite much excellent work on the cultural shaping and eliciting of the senses per se (Classen, 1993; Howes, 2003; Synnott, 1993). Recent exceptions are Groark (2008), Lohmann (2011), and Throop (2009). Lohmann describes Asabano experiences of “body empathy.” In particular, he examines how the Asabano use “sympathetic” physical indicators in their own bodies to indicate the state or experience of others, as when they predict the arrival of an exhausted traveler based on their own armpits becoming involuntarily sweaty—a type of embodied empathy that in certain respects resembles Yapese experiences of *so ulum*, “goose bumps,” which are said to arise when one begins to detect others' inappropriate expressions of emotion (Throop, 2011).

Throop (2009) draws explicit attention to the fact that empathy always involves a multimodal process that “not only involves perception, intellection, affect, and imagination, but also the bodily and sensory aspects of lived experience.” In particular, he examines how a local healer in a Yap community uses touch with her patients as a means of communication, diagnosis, and empathic connection. He makes the interesting point that when certain modes of empathic discernment are blocked or culturally disapproved, others, such as touch, might be hypercognized (Levy, 1973, 1984) and elaborated.

Groark (2008) makes a similar point when he analyzes how Mayan shamans and curers in the highlands of Chiapas, Mexico use not only confession, but also pulse taking to diagnose and discern the pervasive ill will and antipathy of everyday life that

is thought to be one of the major causes of illness there. This form of indirect detection and diagnosis allows them to break through the cloaks of silence and self-concealment that patients and others use to protect themselves from the antipathy they presume surrounds them, and also to shed light on aspects of social life that are otherwise darkened by people's pervasive fear and mistrust of one another:

Curers gain direct access to the internal states of their patients through the taking of the pulse (*pikel*). Illness is said to “become known” or “to manifest in the arm” (*-vinaj ta k'ob*) through the quality of the pulse. A male curer explained to me, “the blood tells everything. If you strike your wife, it says so.” ... The sensory modalities involved in this form of knowing privilege “hearing or listening” (*-a'i*) to the blood by “touching” or pulsing (*-pik*), a process that leads to discernment or clear vision of the underlying social causes of the illness. Indeed, the name for the curer (*j'ilot*) means “one who sees,” reflecting this gift of clear diagnostic discernment. (Groark 2008, p. 442)

It is just such cases of relatively indirect empathic discernment that led Throop and I to hypothesize that:

“marked” forms of empathy, such as those we find in patient–doctor relationships and in healing and religious rituals of various kinds, emerge at just those times and places in the social fabric where more direct, explicit forms of understanding are limited by politics, anxiety, fear, or ignorance. (Hollan & Throop, 2008, p. 394).

A corollary hypothesis is:

... that many marked forms of empathy will involve the cultivation of unusual forms of discernment, such as dream interpretation, spirit possession, or arcane diagnosis, that will help people to decipher and comprehend the veils of ignorance and deception around them. (Hollan & Throop, 2008, p. 394)

The Maya case seems to be a clear example of this.

## Gender and Empathy

From an evolutionary perspective, de Waal argues that:

Empathy needs both a filter that makes us select what we react to, and a turn-off switch. Like every emotional reaction, it has a “portal,” a situation that typically triggers it or that we allow to trigger it. Empathy's chief portal is identification. (2009, p. 213)

Both men and women have this “portal,” and so both men and women are capable of empathizing, but since “men are the more territorial gender, and overall more confrontational and violent than women, one would expect them to have the more effective turn-off switch” (de Waal, 2009, p. 214).

Baron-Cohen (2003) also suggests that empathy varies strongly by sex and gender. He argues that on average, men tend to systemize more than they empathize, that is, they orient to the world by attempting to analyze how things work or by extracting the underlying rules that govern the behavior of a system or thing. This is done “in order to understand and predict the

system, or to invent a new one” (p. 3). In contrast, women, on average, tend to empathize more than they systematize. They are concerned with identifying “another person’s emotions and thoughts” so that they can “respond to them with an appropriate emotion” (p. 2). These differences, though not absolute, are robust, Baron-Cohen argues, and help to explain why diagnosed cases of autism, a disorder that is often characterized by a lack of empathy or social awareness, are so much more common in boys than in girls. Strauss (2004) also notes possible differences in empathy according to gender.

It is important to note here that Baron-Cohen is the only one of the researchers discussed before who makes relatively strong claims about sex or gender affecting the *capacity* to empathize. And even he underscores that the difference between men and women is not absolute. The others make clear that they are discussing differences in the tendency or motivation to express empathy, not the capacity to experience it, which is more in accordance with some of the findings on empathic accuracy by Ickes and his colleague (Mast & Ickes, 2007).

While such studies are suggestive, they are primarily based on work with European or North American populations. To date, we still have very few in-depth studies of empathy and gender among non-Western groups. Although gender was not a primary focus in any of the studies Throop and I collected recently (Hollan & Throop, 2011b), it is clear that many activities are gender segregated in the Pacific region, and that this influences how one learns empathy and from whom, and also the people to whom one’s empathy is most likely to be directed. Moreover, several groups in the Pacific region share the belief that women are more likely than men to both experience and express certain kinds of emotion, such as grief and mourning (Hollan, 2011; Hollan & Wellenkamp, 1994, pp. 88–93; Throop, 2010, 2011). Yet it is also important to note that none of the groups we surveyed made strong claims that the capacity for empathy differs by gender. Given such uneven and partial findings, it seems clear that only much more cross-cultural ethnographic work of a focused nature will enable us to disentangle the effects of sex and gender on either the capacity for empathy or its expression.

## Conclusion

While we are beginning to understand much better the evolutionary, biological, intersubjective, and phenomenological underpinnings of what Stueber (2006) refers to as “basic empathy,” we still know relatively little about how such very basic capacities to attend and attune to the minds and bodies of others become culturally elaborated into more “complex” forms of empathy in which we more or less consciously attempt to know and understand the often ambiguous and complex social behaviors of those around us. This is why I have argued throughout this article that we need more ethnographic studies of empathy in context, as it manifests itself in the flow of naturally occurring behavior. We need to go far beyond de Waal’s (2009) idea of a portal switch that simply turns empathy off on certain occasions. Rather, we need to identify and analyze more precisely and systematically

the variety of cultural frameworks, social situations, and political-economic conditions that tend to either suppress and inhibit basic empathy or amplify it into a frequent and reliable means of social knowing. Until we do this, even our basic definitions of complex empathy will remain relatively imprecise and arbitrary, and likely biased towards forms of empathy as expressed in European and North American contexts.

While focused, explicit studies of empathy in context remain limited, those that we do have raise a number of interesting questions and issues for further study. One primary question is, empathy by whom and for whom? Under what conditions is empathy used to build and maintain boundaries between in-groups and out-groups, and when is it used to bridge those very boundaries? Within a given community, who is encouraged to express empathy and who is discouraged, and under what conditions? And under what kinds of trying circumstances do people either fail in their ability to empathize, give up on empathy altogether, or twist it into harmful forms of projection or misattribution?

Another issue raised by recent research is, if as de Waal and others hypothesize, empathy is essentially altruistic, why do so many people around the world fear its misuse or inaccuracy? From the highlands of Sulawesi (Hollan, 2011; Hollan & Wellenkamp, 1994) to Yap (Throop, 2010, 2011) to Mexico (Groark, 2008) to the Arctic (Briggs, 2008) and beyond, people seem as concerned with concealing their first-person subjective experience from others as in revealing it (see also Robbins & Rumsey, 2008). Such findings suggest that empathic processes are always embedded in moral contexts that strongly affect both the likelihood of their display and how they are experienced. They also indicate that we need to know much more about when and why people use complex empathy to harm or exploit rather than to help, the various ways in which people attempt to protect themselves from such harm, and the conditions under which empathy becomes more fallible and prone to error.

Answers to such basic questions about complex empathy are limited, but existing evidence suggests that displays of empathy for both help and harm are probably far more contingent and punctuated than we had once thought, making all the more important and necessary studies that examine not only the gendered disposition to empathize (or not) or the situations in which empathy is culturally encouraged or discouraged, but the relations between the two (Hollan, 2011; Nezlek et al., 2007).

Recent research also raises interesting questions about the sensory modes through which empathy is experienced and expressed. Much of this work focuses on vision as the mode through which empathic processes of mirroring and simulation are triggered, but it is becoming evident that other modes such as sound (Gallese, 2007) and touch (Groark, 2008; Throop, 2009) are involved as well. Indeed, if, as Throop suggests, empathy always engages a number of different sensory modes, then we could benefit from more focused research on how the cultural mediation of the senses—differentially highlighting and nurturing some senses while suppressing or shunning others—affects both the experience and expression of empathy.



Lastly, the ethnographic study of empathy for or by numinous beings of various kinds, such as gods, spirits, or deceased ancestors, raises the question of just how embodied, visceral, and proximate “the face” (de Waal, 2009) of empathy must be. Does the empathy extended to numinous beings or other imagined communities such as those presented to us through the media or Internet differ in either quality or intensity from that we feel for those physically present, or are they basically the same? More generally, how far beyond its visceral roots can imagination extend the empathic process before it becomes illusion, delusion, or something else?

While the ethnographic studies I have discussed here are beginning to help us identify more clearly the contours and inflections of empathy throughout the world, we will need many more of them before we will be able to answer more definitively what is truly “basic” about human empathy, and what is more culturally shaped and variable.

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