

Whatever Happened to Empathy?: Introduction

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Abstract In this special issue, we examine the problem of empathy in anthropological theorizing and practice. Noting the relative lack of explicit interest in or systematic exploration of empathy in anthropology, we explore some of the issues related to defining, recognizing, and enacting empathic-like processes in cultural context. We also highlight similarities and differences in the way contributors examine empathy, and based on this comparative perspective, we raise a number of questions for further research and discussion. We conclude by noting some of the issues not addressed by this small collection of articles and by suggesting why anthropologists in particular have so much to contribute to the study of empathy. [empathy, intentionality, theory of mind, intersubjectivity]

Several years ago, we began a study of the concept and practice of empathy in anthropology.¹ This was prompted by our interest in the history of ideas in anthropology, but also by the fact that empathy seemed to be a growing topic of research in such varied fields as psychology, medicine, neuroscience, and psychoanalysis. We knew, of course, as do many of the readers of *Ethos*, that Clifford Geertz had put a damper on the use and study of empathy in anthropology when he published his famous critique of the concept in his article “‘From the Native’s Point of View’: On the Nature of Anthropological Understanding (see Geertz 1984 [1976]; Hollan this issue).” But given that all people everywhere must be concerned with what motivates the other people around them, we nevertheless thought empathy or some closely related concept would be a topic of discussion and speculation for anthropologists, even if not a central focus of research. And so we began looking to see what others had written or observed about empathy.

Our review of the literature to date suggests that although many anthropologists seem to presume the importance of empathy in social life and fieldwork, only a handful have been explicit about defining or invoking it or related concepts (e.g., Beatty 2005; Frank 1985, 2000; Geertz 1984; Kracke 1994; Lebra 1976; Rosaldo 1989; Shimizu 2000; Strauss 2004; Watson-Franke and Watson 1975; Wikan 1992). Indeed, we found very few direct or indirect references to empathy even in the tables of content and indices of books central to the history and development of psychological anthropology. As a result, important ethnographic, conceptual, theoretical, and methodological questions remain unaddressed or unanswered.

For example, keeping in mind Anthony Wallace’s observation (1961) that 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—when and why does empathic knowledge of others become important and when and why does it not (cf. Robbins and Rumsey 2008)? When it is important, how is this knowledge gained and how does it differ from other kinds of social knowing? What resources or capacities—biological, psychological, cultural, developmental, experiential, or otherwise—enable people to understand and have empathy for others? What are the social, cultural, political, and economic conditions that foster the development and use of empathy and what are the conditions that suppress its development and use? Are there certain emotions or psychological states that are easier to empathize with than others?² What are the varieties of local idioms through which empathy is manifested and deployed? How does empathy relate to other emotions of concern or understanding such as sympathy, compassion, and love? Can people empathize with “imagined” people and communities in the same way they do with those who are physically present, or are the processes necessarily different in some way? And so on.

Even the definition of empathy remains unsettled for anthropological purposes. *Webster’s Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary* (1967) defines *empathy* as, “1: the imaginative projection of a subjective state into an object so that the object appears to be infused by it 2: the capacity for participating in another’s feelings or ideas.” Note that the first part of the definition—a concept central to many formal, philosophical definitions and theories of empathy (see Throop this issue)—does not distinguish clearly between empathy as an accurate assessment or understanding of another’s feelings or ideas and the psychological mechanism of projection, the attribution of one’s own feelings or ideas to another, whether those attributions match up well with the other’s feelings and ideas or not. Further, it is often not clear how empathy differs from such related concepts as sympathy, intersubjectivity, and intentionality. In the German philosophical tradition, empathy as *Einfühlung* (see Throop this issue) seems to connote some degree of shared feeling or emotional attunement between interlocutors, whereas sympathy is often understood to preserve a sense of one identity “with or for the other” (Audi 1995:219). And yet there are many who argue that it is exactly such a preserved distinction between self and other that fosters the possibility for an “accurate” empathetic understanding of another’s first-person subjective experience (Halpern 2001). There is confusion about the moral and social significance of these terms as well. For example, although Adam Smith (2002) attempts to ground moral philosophy on the “fellow feeling” entailed in sympathy, Emanuel Levinas (2000) suggests that the existential foundation of ethics arises at the limits of our abilities to orient empathetically to others (see Kirmayer this issue).

Intersubjectivity and the problem of intentionality also have significant resonances with the various processes subsumed under the term *empathy*. In anthropology there has been a significant interest in the problem of intersubjectivity in the writings of phenomenologically (see Csordas 1990; Jackson 1998) and linguistically (see Duranti 1993, n.d.; Ochs and Solomon 2005) oriented anthropologists. Intersubjectivity is often characterized as being oriented to another as another subject with experiences that affect and are effected by other such subjects. At times, the concept of intersubjectivity is held to entail processes that serve

as the phenomenological and biologically grounded basis for the more complex emotional, embodied, and cognitive work that is implicated in approximating the subjective experience of another from a quasi-first-person perspective, what we are here calling “empathy.” As Alessandro Duranti notes, what is generally referred to as intersubjectivity spans a gradient that ranges from the most basic forms of recognizing other experiencing subjects to the more complexly layered understandings of others’ actions and intentions that are implicated in more fully articulated empathetic acts (Duranti n.d.).

Recent linguistic anthropological work on autism-spectrum disorders (Ochs et al. 2004; Ochs and Solomon 2005) also speaks to problems and processes associated with empathy. This research has shed much light on what happens to possibilities for everyday social interaction when an individual’s abilities to achieve joint attention, to participate in gaze monitoring, to recognize complex emotions in others, or to understand differences in sensory-based modes of knowing (e.g., touch, sight, hearing) are significantly compromised (Ochs et al. 2004). Work on autism in anthropology and elsewhere also importantly feeds into questions concerning “theory of mind,” the ability to infer what another’s internal dispositions might be (Ochs et al. 2004). In anthropology it seems that questions of “theory of mind” have been largely grounded in the problem of intentionality, that is the problem of how and when it is appropriate to attempt to understand the motives and intentions underlying another’s behaviors (see Duranti 1993, 2001, 2006; Ochs and Schieffelin 1984; Rosen 1995). The articles in this issue have much to contribute to this concern.³

It is interesting, however, that although there is obviously much overlap between investigations of “intentionality” and the problem of “empathy,” there is rarely mention of empathy in the former works. For example, there is not one listing of “empathy” in the index of Laurence Rosen’s edited volume *Other Intentions: Cultural Contexts and the Attribution of Inner States* (1995). Whether the scholars contributing to this literature believe that there are some important differences between studies of intentionality and those of empathy or whether intentionality has served as a means to bring empathy back into anthropology through the backdoor, so to speak, is difficult to say.

Recent work on narrative in anthropology has also on occasion set out to speak to issues bearing on the problem of empathy (Garro and Mattingly 2000). In particular, Cheryl Mattingly’s (2008) work on “mindreading” examines the role that narrative practices play in helping to create a place in which the otherwise hidden landscapes of intention, motivation, and desire of other minds are given an expressive vehicle providing shape and meaning to what may otherwise be the pure sequentiality of observable acts. Drawing from Jerome Bruner’s view of narrative thinking as a mode of thought in which the two “landscapes” of action and intention are integrated by means of emplotment (1986), Mattingly (2008) has examined how such practices of mindreading are complexly enacted in the context of everyday interactions between caregivers and patients in contemporary urban hospitals and treatment centers in Los Angeles and Chicago.

Most recently, Joel Robbins and Alan Rumsey coedited a special journal issue of *Anthropological Quarterly* devoted to the problem of the “opacity of other minds” in the Pacific. Centrally implicated in their examination of how doctrines of mental opacity impact social interaction, intentionality, communicative forms, and language ideologies is a dedicated interest in thinking through how such doctrines may directly limit and pattern distinctive possibilities for empathy in communities where such doctrines exist. Thinking through the extent to which notions of mental opacity may deeply shape everyday interaction, the authors caution anthropologists against relying on any unproblematic assumption that empathetic-like processes are central to developing ethnographic insight in such communities (Robbins and Rumsey 2008).

Although empathy has remained muted in anthropological discussion to the extent that it is often oddly absent from even the most relevant of studies, philosophers and psychologists have kept up a healthy if critical engagement with the concept in recent years (see Bohart and Greenberg 1997; Kögler and Stueber 2000). Issues concerning theory of mind, intentionality, mindreading, and empathy figure quite prominently in contemporary philosophical and psychological debates between so called “simulation theory” and “theory theory,” perspectives concerning the way in which the understanding of other minds is achieved. As Kögler and Stueber (2000) make clear, such debates center on the relative significance of essentially cognitively mediated processing of other’s observed behavior by means of implicit folk-theoretical knowledge (“theory theory”), as opposed to the embodied ability to experientially simulate the experience of another (“simulation theory”). Historically these competing theories grow out of long-standing debates concerning the appropriateness of *verstehen* (“understanding”) and *erklären* (“explanation”) for the study of the so-called human sciences. Indeed, the “simulation theory” and “theory theory” debate replays some of the most persistent disagreements in philosophy, history, and the social sciences concerning the possibility for gaining access to the experience of others, whether as contemporaries, predecessors, or successors (Kögler and Stueber 2000; cf. Schutz 1967).

Given the significance of empathy, both historically and presently, in the debate about methods and epistemology in the social sciences, how do we account for its relative absence in anthropological discussion? Part of the answer does lay, no doubt, with Geertz’s (1984) critique in which he used the failure of anthropologists and others to distinguish clearly between empathy and projection to challenge the idea that gaining first-person-like knowledge of others involves any kind of special experiential or emotional component. Too often, he argued, the anthropologist who presumes she is being “empathic” is merely projecting her own thoughts and feelings onto the unsuspecting subjects of study, thereby mischaracterizing them in the process (Geertz 1984:126). In the immediate wake of Geertz’s critique, a few anthropologists did grapple, at least implicitly, with how accurate empathic attunement might be achieved in fieldwork settings. Two outstanding examples are Vincent Crapanzano’s careful analysis of the complexities of mutual understanding in his book *Tuhami* (1980) and Paul Rabinow’s engagement with issues of intersubjectivity, possibilities for the “fusion of horizons” (Gadamer 1975), and hybridity arising through ethnographic dialogue in *Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco* (1977; cf. Kirschner 1987).

But the relatively muted role of empathy in U.S. anthropological theorizing and practice may have deeper roots in its tradition. Even Franz Boas, for example, was ambivalent about the usefulness of empathy for anthropologists. On the one hand, Boas seemed to champion empathy when acknowledging that the “needs of anthropological research have led many investigators to adapt themselves as thoroughly as may be to the ways of thinking of foreign tribes and peoples, to take part in the joys and sorrows of their life, to penetrate the motives that prompt their actions, and to share the emotions that fill their hearts” (Boas 1904; cf. Stocking 1968:204). And yet, on the other hand, Boas remained decidedly suspicious of such empathetically based approximations of other lifeworlds, given his views on secondary rationalizations and the problems inherent in inferring similarities based on observed likenesses in outwardly perceptible behaviors and effects. Reacting against a Tylorian and Spencerian view of an origin of customary beliefs as rooted in “conscious reasoning,” Boas argued that belief and behavior were derived largely from unconscious reactions to the “general conditions of life” (Stocking 1968:221).

Boas highlights the limits of a social actor’s self-awareness in the face of deeply unconscious cultural knowledge and behavior (to say nothing of the limits of a researcher’s own self-understanding and possibilities for developing insight into another’s subjective life). He also foregrounds the distorting role of secondary rationalizations that serve as explanations for everyday social practices. When such insights are combined with his belief that “inner meanings” may often differ from outwardly observable effects (Stocking 1974:5), empathy becomes a problematic endeavor to say the least.

But no matter what the reason for the relative lack of discussion of empathy, one thing that is clear from the limited anthropological literature currently available is that first-person-like knowledge of others in the context of everyday social practice is rarely, if ever, considered an unambiguously good thing—despite the many positive connotations empathy has in the North American context. Although such knowledge may be used to help others or to interact with them more effectively, it may also be used to hurt or embarrass them. Because of this, people all over the world seem just as concerned with concealing their first-person-subjective experience from others as in revealing it (see Duranti 1993; Groark this issue; Ochs and Schieffelin 1984; Robbins and Rumsey 2008; Rosen 1995; Throop this issue).

Everywhere, we find complex concepts of personhood that convey what is appropriate to know about people and what not, that sketch out how porous or impermeable the boundaries of the self should be ideally, that hint at the damage done when psychic integrity (however defined) is breached. What this suggests is that empathy must always be studied within the much broader context of the ways in which people gain knowledge of others and reveal, allow, or conceal knowledge of themselves.

Our intent in bringing these contributions together and in organizing the 2005 SPA panel from which all but one of them originated,⁴ is to encourage a more focused and systematic study of empathy in anthropology—both in the way it is used and gains expression in other

societies and in conducting fieldwork. Just as humans have evolved complex ways of “owning” and representing their own experience in the world (Hallowell 1955), so we seem to have evolved complex ways of knowing about the thoughts, feelings, and intentions of others.⁵ The time has come, we think, to accept Geertz’s 30-year-old challenge to be explicit about what we mean by empathy and how it relates to other forms of perception and knowledge.

This collection is meant to be a start in this direction, but just a start. As several of our reviewers noted, the articles that follow are quite diverse in terms of the methods and analytical strategies utilized, the range of empathic behaviors observed or reported on, their rhetorical styles, and even their length! And indeed, participants were chosen not because they represented certain points of view (complementary, oppositional, or otherwise) or because their data represented certain types or ranges of empathic behavior but because we knew from their previous work that they would likely have something interesting to say about the empathic process. Nevertheless, despite this diversity, all of the contributions do grapple with our central concern: how it is that humans gain (or fail to gain) a first-person-like perspective on the behavior of others. Let us quickly summarize the primary theses of each article before turning to a discussion of the conceptual and ethnographic questions they raise when taken as a whole.

Jason Throop begins his discussion by briefly tracing out for us the history of empathy in the Western philosophical tradition. Borrowing some ideas specifically from phenomenology and hermeneutics, he identifies four dimensions along which cultures might variously constitute and shape the empathic process—a temporal dimension, an intentionality dimension, a discernability dimension, and an appropriateness dimension. He then demonstrates the analytical and comparative power of this dimensional and comparative approach by showing when and how empathy operates in a Micronesian community that values self and emotional control, mental opacity, secrecy, and privacy (cf. Robbins and Rumsey 2008).⁶

Kevin Groark’s contribution examines empathy and its lack in a highland Mayan society in which ill will and mistrust are presumed to be pervasive. With rich ethnographic data, he shows how empathic-like knowledge of others can be experienced as an intrusion or attack, and he argues why it is important to situate the analysis of empathy within the much broader study of the ways people have of gaining knowledge of others and revealing or concealing knowledge of themselves. His discussion of a curer’s efficacy illustrates the interesting paradox that empathy and affect attunement are often mobilized only in the aftermath of a lack of empathy and harm done.

Jean Briggs’s article is an experience-near attempt to capture her own struggle to empathize with the Inuit of northern Canada. She explains how her understanding of Inuit children, which was always more acute than for adults, was furthered by the fact that in many respects, she was often cast as a childlike participant throughout much of her fieldwork. This shared positionality with children, as Rosaldo (1989) would refer to it, gave her an invaluable perspective onto their emotional lives. Briggs makes clear that empathic knowledge of others

often develops in the crucible of one's own pain, confusion, and humiliation as one struggles to make sense of social interaction.

Laurence Kirmayer explores the necessity and limits of empathy in clinical psychiatric settings in which physicians and other help professionals are confronted with patients whose mental and emotional illnesses make them very difficult to understand, especially when the physician and patient come from different cultural and social backgrounds. In doing so, he makes reference to the underlying biology of empathy, but underscores the fact that our understanding of others, in the clinic or elsewhere, unfolds within a political and cultural context. He uses the work of the existential philosopher and ethicist Emmanuel Levinas to suggest how an empathic stance toward others can be assumed and maintained even at the moment of a failure to understand.

In the last article, Douglas Hollan, like Kirmayer, argues that the empathic work of understanding always is embedded in an intersubjective encounter that requires ongoing dialogue for its accuracy. As such, it implicates the imaginative and emotional capacities of the person to be understood as well as those of the person or persons trying to understand. This flip side of empathy, as Hollan refers to it—the ways in which people promote, allow, or hinder understanding of themselves—requires much more active investigation, he argues. By way of illustration, he shows how the Toraja of Indonesia promote understanding of themselves, in certain contexts,⁷ through a discourse of persuasion, coaxing, and appeal.

One of the first things that become obvious from reading this collection of work is that we are dealing with a very complex phenomenon indeed. Kirmayer notes that empathy can be decomposed, at the very least, into the four distinct but interacting processes of sensorimotor synchrony, vicarious emotion, perspective taking, and fantasy or imaginative elaboration, and that we can empathically “resonate” with others through such things as bodily stance, gesture and habitus, basic emotions that are biological or existential givens, and explicit images, stories, or scenarios. Not to mention through the dreams, free associations, and pulse rates that Groak's Mayan curer uses. Throop adds to the complexity by pointing out that cultures orient empathic processes, not along a single dimension but along several. And Hollan reminds us that empathy, in contrast to projection, implicates the emotional and imaginative capacities of the people we are attempting to understand, as well as our own. All of this complexity is daunting, and reminds us how careful we must be in making comparative statements about empathy. But taken as a whole, the issue suggests a number of interesting questions for further discussion and research:

How is Empathy to Be Distinguished from other Attitudes and Behaviors?

In contrast to Geertz, all of the contributors here seem to agree that empathy is a first-person-like perspective on another that involves an emotional, embodied, or experiential

aspect. The emotional aspect is one of the things that distinguish it from other ways of knowing about people, just as Jodi Halpern (2001) suggests. It is one of the ways we know how and why people are thinking and feeling what they are, not just that they are. Beyond this, however, things remain murky. For example, does this embodied engagement with another imply a caring, concerned attitude, as Kirmayer seems to suggest with his clinical and ethical examples and that is so often presumed in the North American context? And if so, does it then have a family or semantic resemblance to such attitudes as sympathy and compassion? Is it this caring attitude that distinguishes empathy from other embodied ways of gaining a first-person perspective on others? Or is empathy without moral or ethical valence, so that it can be used to harm as well as help?

Certainly the ethnographic examples we have here from Yapese, highland Maya, Inuit, and Torajan communities reiterate the point we made above that many people fear how others will use intimate knowledge of them and may go to great length, consciously and less than consciously, to block such knowledge by others. In the extreme, they may fear others will use empathic-like knowledge to physically harm or kill, as the highland Maya do. But even as in the case of the Inuit, where personal knowledge is used not to harm blatantly but to shame and humiliate with the ostensible purpose of teaching people how to behave properly, we see how potentially hurtful such information can be. Indeed, here and in her other work (1970, 1998), Briggs does a brilliant job of showing how empathic-like attitudes can be mixed with humor and aggression to produce behavior that is truly bewildering and confusing to the people to whom it is directed, leaving them wondering, Is this other person laughing with me or at me? Are they helping me in some way or hurting me in some way (cf. Bateson 1972)?

And if empathic-like processes may sometimes blend with potentially harmful ones, on the one side of the definitional coin, how are they to be distinguished from other attitudes of caring and concern on the other side? For Halpern, what makes empathy distinctive is that it implies understanding why someone is thinking or feeling the way they do, not just that he or she does. That is what distinguishes it from other types of affective sharing or merger with others, such as sympathy or compassion. But if such a semantic and behavioral parsing holds in the North American context, does it elsewhere? In Toraja, empathic processes and acts often seem embedded in the larger, more inclusive idiom of love–compassion–concern.⁸ *Ma'pakaboro'*, *ma-mali lako* convey concern about someone's welfare. The words express love and compassion (*mamase*) in times of need as well as the sense of being sorry for another. These terms also convey the sense that one is accustomed to another and thinks about and yearns for (*ma 'inaa-naa*) that other when they are away (Hollan and Wellenkamp 1994:57). It is often the love–compassion–concern for the other that motivates and provides a context for understanding them. This is also the case in Yap where a dialectic of suffering (*gaafgow*) and compassion (*runguy*) play out on multiple levels in local understandings of social life (see Throop 2008).

As anthropologists, we would expect some of this semantic and behavioral variation, no matter what the biological underpinnings of empathic awareness turn out to be. Like any

other form of complex human behavior, empathy emerges in an intersubjective field, partially determined by the evolved characteristics of the human species, one highly social in nature, but significantly constituted and structured by social, cultural, linguistic, and developmental variables as well. Empathy must be motivated, focused and directed, encouraged or discouraged, amplified or suppressed, made meaningful or not, and so on. All of this occurs within particular social and cultural contexts and idioms. Even our small sample of societies here illustrates a considerable range in how these processes unfold, although skewed in the direction of mistrust and suppression of empathy. But it is indeed a small sample, and we need many more studies of the ethnopsychology of empathy before we can be more certain about its semantic and behavioral boundaries, if boundaries there are.

What are the Politics of Empathy and Their Relation to the Broader Social Order?

Empathic processes do not unfold in a political or moral vacuum. Rather, they are encouraged and amplified in some contexts and discouraged and suppressed in others. For example, all societies everywhere attempt to prohibit empathy in at least some contexts to pursue other highly valued goals, such as training soldiers or hunters (Grossman 1996; Wallerslev 2004; cf. Hinton 2005). Among the Toraja, however, we can see how empathy is mobilized in some contexts through a discourse of appeal and elaborate etiquette that can sustain a hierarchically organized society based on reciprocity. Among the Inuit, we can see how a rough form of empathy can encourage the development of highly valued forms of self-sufficiency and emotional control. The Toraja example fits, perhaps, with the widespread notion that healing and psychotherapeutic practices mobilizing empathy and related processes are inherently conservative of the social order, because they promote individual solace, rather than social or political action.

But empathy and its suppression are potentially subversive of established order as well. When a Mayan curer identifies and verbalizes a social, familial, or interpersonal conflict when no one else has or will, when a psychiatrist or other health professional helps a patient imagine new ways of relating to people, when a Yapese person perceives the distress or anger in another's communication, despite that other's best efforts to hide or control those emotions, or conversely, when someone in any of the societies discussed here violates the rules of normal etiquette, either deliberately or accidentally, thus offending others, the normative order becomes breached, at least momentarily, and provides the opportunity for something new and unexpected to happen. The last example reminds us that the aversion of the potentially shaming gaze or interaction is one of the most common and important forms of empathic communication we find anywhere. In all societies, one must learn to look away, to pretend not see, at appropriate moments.

Empathy or its lack can be seen, then, as a type of metacommunication among people that can reinforce or undermine other forms of communication and interaction. It can be

mobilized or suppressed deliberately and consciously, as in most of the examples above, but it may also come into play less consciously and less deliberately, as when the Inuit draw on it to shame others or as when a person caught in the midst of a transference or countertransference reaction (positive or negative) empathizes or not in culturally inappropriate ways.

What is the Necessity for Empathy in Social Life? What Are Its Limits?

Following from some of the examples and discussion thus far we might ask, what is the necessity for empathy in social life, and what are its limits? We have already mentioned several times that much of social life goes on without empathic-like awareness or when such awareness is actively suppressed or discouraged. And yet even in places like Yap and the Mayan highlands of Mexico where empathic awareness is mistrusted or curtailed, we find evidence of its marked or unmarked presence. Indeed in both places, people seem acutely aware that every attempt to hide or conceal emotions and motives is at the same time a subtle way of revealing them, if one but knows how to hear and see. Throop mentions that it is through third person discourse in the form of gossip that a type of empathic awareness becomes honed and developed in Yap. Much like the Torajan case, the context specificity of these limits and possibilities for empathy are found in Yapese discourses of compassion (*runguy*) and suffering (*gaafgow*) that are tied to the formation of attachment and belonging within a thoroughly hierarchical system of relatedness. And Groark writes that the Maya, almost despite themselves, empower their curers with the empathic tools and data they need to render diagnoses and therapeutic recommendations of considerable social and personal salience.

When we consider that Kirmayer argues that empathy is critical in the psychiatric clinic, where both illness and cultural ignorance challenge mutual understanding, we might 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. A corollary hypothesis might be 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. The Maya case seems to be a clear example of this.

But there appear to be definite limits to empathy as well, even when it is culturally marked and encouraged. Hollan reminds us that empathy is an ongoing, dialogical, intersubjective accomplishment that depends very much on what others are willing or able to let us understand about them. He points out how challenging it can be to make accurate empathic assessments of others even under the best of circumstances, such as some psychotherapeutic contexts provide. Part of the difficulty here is that even the people we are attempting to empathize with may not know why they think or act or feel the way they do, or even what they think or feel at certain times. Of course, one of the interesting things about empathic

encounters is that they sometimes allow people to know and understand things about themselves that they would not know or understand alone. But the fact that people's motives are often conflicted and less than conscious ensures that empathic understanding always will be elusive and uncertain. This is one of the reasons why Kirmayer argues that to maintain empathic openness and cordiality in the face of all the obstacles to understanding requires an ethical stance as well as an emotional and intellectual one.

Of course there are other questions about the limits of empathy that we touch on only indirectly here. For example, is empathy a luxury that only those with adequate resources can afford (cf. Scheper-Hughes 1993)? Can one be moved to participate in the thoughts and feelings of another if one is impoverished and overwhelmed oneself? How many people can one empathize with before feeling overwhelmed? Do face-to-face encounters demand a certain kind of empathic response that more distal, imagined relationships do not? Or can imagined communities evoke the same kind of visceral, empathic response that face-to-face encounters do?

How is Empathy to Be Investigated?

The contributions here present a variety of approaches to the study of empathy, although all grow out of long-term engagements in the field, whether the clinic or more traditional anthropological settings. This is important to emphasize because as we mentioned above, empathy has semantic and behavioral shadings to it that may take months or even years to unravel. None of the authors claim they have developed the only or "right" way to study empathy, and we can see how complementary the approaches are.

Let us begin with Briggs and Throop, because they are the most explicit about the methodologies they use, and also the most complementary. Throop argues that we must first discern how cultures orient empathic processes along the dimensions of temporality, intentionality, discernability, and appropriateness before we can understand how they play out in ongoing interaction. One might characterize this as a top down approach in which one must first parse the semantic-phenomenological shadings of empathic processes before one can identify and examine them "in action." Briggs, however, makes no bones about the fact that much of what she knows about Inuit life came about serendipitously, even haphazardly, as she struggled to make sense of her own and others' emotional experience in the midst of social interaction. And she is skeptical that we can identify empathic processes apart from such wanderings in the dark.

One of Groark's main points is that whether one uses cultural and linguistic orientations and concepts to guide one's analysis of ongoing empathic processes (including one's own reactions to or involvement with those processes) or moves the other way around, from embodied engagement in ongoing interaction to more generalized ideas about how empathy works, one must situate empathic processes within the broader study of the ways people

gain knowledge of others and reveal or conceal knowledge of themselves. With this approach, he shows how empathy can both reinforce or undermine these other ways of social knowing and, in turn, how it can be reinforced or undermined by them.

Hollan asks the basic question, empathy from whose point of view? He reminds us that empathy cannot be established or maintained without the collaboration of those we are attempting to understand, and he argues that we should investigate more thoroughly when and why others encourage or discourage our understanding of them.

Kirmayer is concerned with what happens to empathy at the very limits of understanding, when even one's best efforts to resonate with others are blocked by illness or linguistic and cultural ignorance. To maintain empathic openness at such moments, he argues, anthropologists, psychiatrists, and others must have a political and ethical stance that will enable them to acknowledge the limits of their own understanding, and perhaps the impossibility of empathy in certain situations, while at the same time remaining convinced of others' basic humanness and knowability.

There are interesting lessons to be learned from each of these approaches, we think, but an ideal ethnographic study of empathy might combine elements from all of them. It would, perhaps, attempt to ascertain how a given culture or subculture orients empathic processes, along the lines that Throop suggests, meanwhile constantly testing these emerging understandings in the crucible of one's own and others' embodied engagements in social interaction (Briggs this issue). This, of course, resonates with Geertz's promotion of a hermeneutic tacking back and forth between experience-near and experience-distant perspectives—although it should be noted that Geertz clearly would not have advocated that the ethnographer rely on his or her own emotional or experiential reactions in making such assessments. It is also important to recall that some of the most significant anthropological insights regarding the taken-for-granted nature of our own self-understanding have arisen in moments in which there is a loss of mutuality of perspective, a loss of empathy. Recurrent efforts at developing and retrieving such mutuality in the face of its recurrent loss is in fact a central, if undertheorized, hallmark of the ethnographic enterprise.

These investigations might also pay special attention to the flip side of empathy—the ways in which others help or hinder our understanding of them (Hollan)—while simultaneously situating empathic processes within the broader context of other forms of social knowing (Groark this issue). And the whole enterprise would be conducted knowing in advance that the study of empathy will be challenging and elusive, at times impossible, and yet nevertheless worthy of the effort and frustration (Kirmayer this issue).

Conclusion

The themes and issues tying together this small collection of articles barely touch on all the interesting questions about empathy that remain (see paragraph two above). For example,

Hollan and Kirmayer both allude to our growing knowledge of the biological underpinnings of empathic awareness, but neither discusses them at length (cf. Iacoboni 2005; Tomasello et al. 2005). Does the existence of such underpinnings suggest that we are capable of empathizing with one another much more than we do, were we to develop and nurture those capacities, rather than suppress or undermine them? Is it possible that some people are born inherently more capable of empathy than others? Which kinds of mental illnesses and brain injuries interfere with or eliminate the capacity for empathy and which do not? Clearly, these are topics worthy of much more extensive research and discussion.

Another area we barely touch on is how empathy develops throughout life. What are the kinds of experiences in early life that promote or inhibit the development of empathy in later life? Do people who care for others, either out of choice or necessity, become better empathizers than those who do not? Or does empathy become a luxury one cannot afford under such circumstances? When does deprivation lead to an increased empathy for fellow sufferers and when does it lead to a suppression of empathy and identification with the aggressor? Psychologists and psychoanalysts have had some interesting things to say about such issues, but anthropologists need to tackle them as well.

Finally, how do we account for those moments in which empathy seems to be completely absent? What processes of dehumanization allow one human to do overt and extreme harm to another? How do we understand the psychological, cultural, political, and economic contexts in which human capacities for empathy can become so stilled that individuals can engage in acts of collective violence, torture, and genocide? There has been increasing anthropological interest in such instances of extreme social suffering in recent years (see Daniel 1996; Das 2007; Hinton 2005; Kleinman et al. 1997; Scheper-Hughes 1993). Understanding the problem of empathy in the face of such violence is perhaps one of the most important tasks we have as students of human social life.

So although there is much we have not touched on here, we hope at the very least that we have demonstrated why empathy is such a compelling and important topic of research and why anthropologists, in particular, have so much to contribute to its study. If we have succeeded in this, then perhaps later generations of anthropologists will not have to ask as we have, “Whatever happened to empathy?”

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Notes

1. Our title alludes to Melford Spiro's 1979 article, “Whatever Happened to the Id?” in which he analyzes how and why sex, aggression, and related drives and emotions fall out of Lévy-Straussian structural analysis.

2. We are grateful to one of our reviewers for raising this question for us.
3. It is important to note that anthropologists in using the term *intentionality* are usually referring to an understanding of intentions as motivations for action or the goals that are informing an individual's plans for action and not to the more rigorous phenomenological understanding of intentionality as a foundational property of consciousness in its orientation to intentional objects (see Brentano 1995; Duranti 1993; Husserl 1962).
4. The original panelists included Jean Briggs, Thomas Csordas, Cameron Hay, Douglas Hollan, Laurence Kirmayer, Robert Desjarlais, and Jason Throop. We wish to thank all the panelists for their participation and inspiration.
5. We say more about the evolution and biology of empathy below.
6. The analytical stance here is similar to the one Hallowell takes in his article, "The Self and Its Behavioral Environment" (1955), in which he argues that although all selves must be oriented to themselves, other objects, time, motivations, and norms, the way in which these basic orientations develop and unfold will differ by culture.
7. In other contexts, the Toraja are just as concerned about concealing their inner thoughts from others as are the Yapese and highland Maya.
8. A similar idiom can be found in Yap (see Throop this issue) and throughout the Pacific.

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