

# The Interpersonal Functions of Empathy: A Relational Perspective

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## Abstract

Empathy is an extensively studied construct, but operationalization of effective empathy is routinely debated in popular culture, theory, and empirical research. This article offers a process-focused approach emphasizing the relational functions of empathy in interpersonal contexts. We argue that this perspective offers advantages over more traditional conceptualizations that focus on primarily intrapsychic features (i.e., within the individual). Our aim is to enrich current conceptualizations and empirical approaches to the study of empathy by drawing on psychological, philosophical, medical, linguistic, and anthropological perspectives. In doing so, we highlight the various functions of empathy in social interaction, underscore some underemphasized components in empirical studies of empathy, and make recommendations for future research on this important area in the study of emotion.

## Keywords

communication, emotion, empathy, interpersonal, relational

If you want to come and help me, first ask me what I want . . . Then we can work together.

Boniface Mwangi (cited in Herrman, 2015)

The construct of empathy has long fascinated and eluded scholars, writers, and the public. However, there remains a great deal of confusion about the nature of empathy and how best to study the processes through which it is manifested. In this article we argue that empathy is best characterized not by a finite point in time of mutual affective experience, but rather as a dynamic process that involves cognitive and emotional discoveries about others' experiences. Consider Hesse's (1951) fictional novel about young Siddhartha and his friend Govinda, both seeking divine knowledge from Gotama, the Buddha. After hearing the Buddha's teachings, Govinda decides to continue passively listening and engages in a journey turned inward. Conversely, Siddhartha realizes that the only path to nirvana is through active engagement with the world. In acknowledging his own ignorance, Siddhartha is set on a path of interpersonal

discovery; to learn about life by engaging with the experiences of others. Such a process of continuous, active engagement with the unique experiences of others to inform one's own understanding is central to empathy. However, there has traditionally been an emphasis on the *intrapersonal* nature of empathy, lacking inclusion of such *interpersonal* curiosity and discovery. This article seeks to emphasize the importance of broadening conceptualizations of empathy to highlight empathy as an inherently interpersonal and relational construct.

Central to our perspective is that empathy involves the act of *imagining* what is significant from another person's perspective (Halpern, 2001; Jackson, Brunet, Meltzoff, & Decety, 2006). Such imagining may vary in accuracy, depending on a variety of contextual factors, and an affective match may or may not occur. Thus, in contrast to traditional psychological approaches, accuracy and affective match are not criterial in our conceptualization of empathy (though they may be outcomes of the empathic process). Rather, the use of feedback from the person with whom one is empathizing and continuing curiosity to achieve a more accurate appreciation of the other's emotional perspective are integral to

the empathic process (Halpern, 2001). This article does not seek to provide an all-encompassing definition of empathy or to disentangle or distinguish empathy from related constructs (we refer the reader to excellent reviews on this topic by Cuff, Brown, Taylor, & Howat, 2016; Wondra & Ellsworth, 2015; Zaki, 2014). Rather, we argue that current conceptualizations of empathy focus on some aspects of the construct to the detriment of others.

In what follows we highlight the value of shifting current theory and research on empathy from a focus on intrapsychic (i.e., within the individual) processes that cause one to feel emotions more similar to those of another to an emphasis on the interpersonal functions of empathy. We highlight some pitfalls of conceptualizing empathy in a manner that does not take such function(s) into account, and discuss some underemphasized aspects of empathy. In doing so, we argue that although traditional and current conceptualizations of empathy have contributed to our understanding of individuals' *experience* of empathy, they have fallen short in elucidating our understanding of the *relational functions of empathy* in interpersonal contexts. We draw on psychological, philosophical, medical, linguistic, and anthropological perspectives to highlight such functions, underscore some underemphasized components in empirical studies of empathy, and make recommendations for future research on this important area in the study of emotion.

## Defining Emotion

A firm conceptualization of empathy must be rooted in a firm conceptualization of emotion—a term that has suffered from similar definitional ambiguity (Dixon, 2012). Interestingly, most theories of empathy fail to take a strong stance on defining emotion. Likewise, theories of emotion often disregard empathy because empathy is not considered an “emotion proper” given the focus of the empathizer on the goals and situation of another (Wondra & Ellsworth, 2015). In what follows we provide a brief overview of how different perspectives of emotion map onto different perspectives of empathy.

### *Emotion as Intrapersonal*

Definitions of emotion typically stress various aspects of one's own personal experience, placing emphasis on feeling states in response to stimuli (e.g., James, 1890), physiological response (e.g., Öhman, 1986), facial expression (e.g., P. Ekman, 1999), cognition (e.g., Lazarus, 1991), and behavior (e.g., Frijda, 1986). More recent theoretical perspectives have attempted to unite these separate elements and acknowledge them as interwoven in the emotion process (e.g., Lench, Bench, Darbor, & Moore, 2015). Even so, current perspectives of emotion typically highlight the *intrapersonal* aspects of emotion (e.g., feelings, emotional expressions as readouts of internal states) and underemphasize *interpersonal* aspects (for a review, see Campos, Walle, Dahl, & Main, 2011).

### *Emotion as Interpersonal*

A relational perspective of emotion emphasizes the complex interplay between the person and the environment (Campos et al.,

2011; Reeck, Ames, & Ochsner, 2016; Zaki & Williams, 2013). As such, emotions are defined as the “attempt by the person to establish, maintain, change, or terminate the relation between the self and the environment on matters of personal significance” (Campos, Campos, & Barrett, 1989, p. 395). This conceptualization lacks the canonical focus on feeling states as principal to emotion (Gross & Feldman Barrett, 2011) and instead centers on the individual's goals in personally relevant contexts.

Such personally relevant contexts are, more often than not, interpersonal in nature, resulting in the emotions of one person influencing those of another in a dynamic, bidirectional fashion (Butler, 2015; Campos et al., 2011; Reeck et al., 2016; Zaki & Williams, 2013). Thus, one individual's emotions cannot be meaningfully disentangled from those of another in interpersonal contexts. Examples of such bidirectional emotional influence are apparent when one copes with stressful situations by utilizing social support as a coping strategy (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), negative emotions of one partner predicting greater likelihood of the other partner experiencing negative emotion (e.g., Carstensen, Gottman, & Levenson, 1995), and emotional experiences in the context of close relationships being closely linked behaviorally and physiologically (e.g., Levenson & Gottman, 1983). Given the inherently interpersonal nature of empathy (Zaki, Bolger, & Ochsner, 2008), these principles are transferrable to theoretical and empirical work on the topic of empathy.

## Defining Empathy

Empathy has also fallen victim to conceptualizations that typically emphasize intrapsychic, but not interpersonal, elements of the construct. Most notably, the emphasis on feeling states as criterial for empathy has characterized its study. For example, experiencing emotions that are similar to those of another or consistent with another's situation is a central feature of classic theories on empathy (e.g., Eisenberg & Strayer, 1987; Hoffman, 2000). Such theories have primarily focused on feelings of “empathic distress” as motivators of prosocial behavior (Hoffman, 2000). Intrapersonal variables that have been the focus of prior work include emotion regulation (Eisenberg & Strayer, 1987) and self–other differentiation (Hoffman, 2000), as well as contextual variables such as ease of avoidance of the person in distress (e.g., Batson, Fultz, & Shorenrade, 1987), attenuate the relation between the tendency to resonate with another's emotions and acting prosocially.

Davis (1983) first introduced and popularized empathy as a multidimensional construct, encompassing both affective and cognitive dimensions. Current conceptualizations have continued to emphasize both affective and cognitive components as essential to empathy. A recent review by Cuff and colleagues (Cuff et al., 2016) revealed that many definitions have adopted Davis's view by including both affective aspects (i.e., feeling what someone else is feeling) and cognitive aspects (i.e., perspective taking). Other related concepts such as empathic concern and empathic accuracy have also emerged as possible components of empathy, each lending a hand to the current understanding (and confusion) of the construct (Blanke, Raters, & Riediger, 2015; Engelen & Röttger-Rössler, 2012). More recent research has

emphasized the neuropsychological foundations of empathy in an effort to describe the intrapersonal processes involved in empathic experience (e.g., De Vignemont & Singer, 2006; Walter, 2012). A review by Zaki and Ochsner (2012) concluded that empathy consists of various cognitive and emotional processes involving multiple neurological networks. These distinct processes (i.e., mentalizing and experience sharing) vary in their likelihood of facilitating empathic accuracy depending on interpersonal and other contextual factors (Zaki & Ochsner, 2011, 2012). While there have been major advances in understanding intrapsychic processes of empathy (e.g., neurological, experiential), far less emphasis has been placed on *interpersonal* processes of empathy.

To illustrate empathy as an interpersonal process, consider the following scenario: A mother discovers her adolescent son sent a text message to a friend after bedtime. She takes away his phone as punishment, and her son subsequently withdraws to his room. The parent may interpret her son's withdrawal as anger in response to his phone being taken away (a perfectly reasonable interpretation given the importance of peer relationships in adolescence). The parent's perception of the child's emotion as indicative of anger may elicit a similarly angry, avoidant response from the child. From an intrapsychic perspective, the parent's perception could be viewed as empathic (e.g., labeling the son's emotion; an attempt at perspective taking insofar as the parent would be angry about her own phone being taken away—*affective matching*). However, in actuality the adolescent's withdrawal reflected sadness because he perceived his parent's disciplinary action as conveying a lack of trust. Thus, although the parent may believe that she is quite competent at appreciating her child's emotion, she entirely missed the mark. Conversely, a parent signaling curiosity about the adolescent's perspective, rather than responding with her own "*affective matching*," may be more likely to provide an opportunity for the adolescent to disclose his concern and thereby facilitate mutual understanding. Such curiosity constitutes what we operationalize as empathic responding. This example highlights the power of conceptualizing empathy as a continuous process of imagining and attempting to understand another's distinct emotional perspective on matters of personal significance.

### **Underemphasized Aspects of the Empathy Process**

We believe that the process-focused approach we have outlined offers advantages over traditional conceptualizations of empathy. In what follows we highlight these advantages by demonstrating how traditional conceptualizations underemphasize important aspects of empathy. Specifically, (a) the interpersonal nature of empathy, (b) the relational functions of empathy, (c) empathy as more than accurate labeling of others' emotions, (d) the dynamic nature of empathy as a process that unfolds over time, and (e) how empathy is culturally situated.

#### *Empathy is Interpersonal*

Empathy is an inherently interpersonal process (Zaki et al., 2008). This may seem like an obvious point, as the absence of a

social partner (physical or imagined) would result in no one with whom to empathize. However, while psychological research on empathy has often lacked a relational focus, in real life empathy is an interactive social process dependent upon both individuals for adaptive functioning.

Whether an individual is successfully able to empathize with another partially depends on the openness or resistance of the person being empathized with (i.e., the emoter; Greenson, 1960; Halpern, 2001; Hollan, 2008, 2012; Ickes, Marangoni, & Garcia, 1997). The feedback provided by the person with whom one is empathizing, whether it is explicit (e.g., a direct statement of the social partner's inaccuracy) or implicit (e.g., a flash of anger at being misunderstood), helps the empathizer develop a greater understanding of the emoter's relation with the environment and thereby facilitates the empathy process. If a person who regularly and adeptly empathizes with others in his or her daily interactions encounters an individual who is emotionally suppressive or ambiguous in their emotional communication, the empathic process will likely be more challenging. In the previously described parent-adolescent example, if the adolescent was unwilling to engage with the parent's curiosity or became defensive or withdrew further, this would likely impede the empathic process. Thus, the type of feedback to empathic attempts that is offered, in addition to the way such feedback is responded to, mutually influence the empathic process over time.

Put simply, empathy does not depend wholly upon a trait-like propensity to resonate with the emotions of others; rather, it also depends upon the relationship between the parties at hand, including the characteristics of the empathizer, the emoter, and other contextual elements. A clever experimental study by Zaki et al. (2008) tested this premise. Subjects viewed video recordings of an individual who was either high or low in emotional expressiveness telling a personally significant story. The researchers found that individuals high in self-reported trait empathy were only accurate perceivers of the storyteller's emotions when the target was highly expressive. This suggests that successful empathy (characterized in this study as empathic accuracy) is optimally attained when the emoter provides sufficient information about their emotions to the empathizer. This study is an important first step for understanding the interpersonal nature of empathy. However, behavioral flexibility was limited in this study due to the nature of the task and goals of the investigation. Specifically, subjects were not given the opportunity to interact with the target. Such interaction would allow for subjects to engage in information seeking or other behaviors that may have promoted further emotional understanding. Future research allowing for such behavioral flexibility would facilitate a greater understanding of how individuals may modify their communicative behaviors to facilitate empathy over time.

#### *The Adaptiveness of Empathic Behaviors Depends on the Context*

Particular empathic behaviors vary in their functional utility in specific contexts. Consider a feature common to many

conceptualizations of empathy: shared affect. Mirroring another's emotional expression, a behavior often indicative of shared affect, is associated with positive interpersonal outcomes (Jacoboni, 2007) and is hypothesized to motivate individuals' engagement in prosocial actions (Eisenberg & Strayer, 1987; Hoffman, 2000). Indeed, there is a large body of literature demonstrating moderate associations between reports of feeling distressed oneself when witnessing another in distress and reports of motivation to help (e.g., Carlo, Eisenberg, Troyer, Switzer, & Speer, 1991; Davis, 1983; Hoffman, 2000). This tendency for humans (and possibly nonhuman primates; see de Waal, 2008) to engage in such intersubjectivity and helping behavior may be rooted in human evolution and contribute to cooperation in the species (see Akhtar & Tomasello, 1998).

However, shared affect can also be quite maladaptive in certain contexts. For example, shared affect during interpersonal conflict may exacerbate negative arousal. Several decades of research by Gottman and colleagues have demonstrated that shared negative affect in the context of conflict discussions among romantic couples predicts poorer marital outcomes (e.g., divorce, marital dissatisfaction) over time (see Gottman, Gottman, Greendorfer, & Wahbe, 2014, for a review). Furthermore, shared affect in the form of sympathetic distress (i.e., focusing on one's own distress at the expense of the other's distress; see Batson et al., 1987) may lead to egoistic drift (Hoffman, 2000), and psychological burnout (E. Ekman & Halpern, 2015).

Research in palliative medicine has shown that clinicians with above average interpersonal empathy skills tend to experience lower levels of sympathetic distress than their less empathic peers, suggesting a disjuncture between simply sharing the distress of another and successful empathy during interactions with patients (Halpern, 2014). Indeed, medical students who become more personally distressed in response to patients' distress have steeper declines in empathy during medical training (Halpern, 2014; Neumann et al., 2011). Additionally, shared affect may limit one's ability to engage in effective reasoning in some situations (Bloom, 2013), thereby resulting in overly empathic individuals being "duped" into helping another in a manner that harms the empathizer (Hollan, 2012). Thus, while shared affect may serve a prosocial function in some contexts (primarily by motivating individuals to help others when they are in distress), it can also have deleterious effects in other contexts.

Curiosity and interest are empathic behaviors likely to be highly adaptive in contexts in which empathy is typically challenging, such as interpersonal conflict. Conflict inherently involves divergent viewpoints and often negative emotional arousal, making it more difficult to understand another's perspective (Broome, 1993; Halpern, 2007). However, understanding another's perspective during an argument inhibits destructive behavior and promotes constructive behavior (Davis, 1994). It has been argued that some level of emotional engagement is necessary to experience empathy during conflicts, but the empathic process is incomplete without focusing on the meaning behind another's emotion (Halpern, 2007). For example,

shared affect in the absence of curiosity about another's perspective is associated with poor doctor-patient communication and medical outcomes in the context of doctor-patient conflicts (see Halpern, 2007). Thus, expanding conceptualizations of empathy to include curiosity and attempts to understand another's perspective may be useful for understanding empathy in the context of conflict (Halpern, 2007).

Additional contextual elements for consideration include appreciating the hierarchical nature of the goals of the emoter and the empathizer and the means available for responding (as well as culture, a point expanded on later). For example, a mentor may choose not to intervene with a distressed mentee struggling to write a manuscript because of an understanding of the student's long-term goal to become an independent academic. Thus, the lack of instrumental helping in the moment serves the function of helping the student attain long-term objectives.

Furthermore, an individual's empathic response may be constrained due to the affordances of the context, such as the student's parent who can listen over the phone to her child's struggles while writing the manuscript, but not write the manuscript for her. Such considerations highlight the importance of taking context into account when evaluating empathy in real-life and laboratory settings. Rather than using a priori criteria for the manifestation of empathic behaviors, operationalizing empathic behaviors by their function may be of greater validity.

### *Empathy is More Than Emotion Labeling*

Empathy involves an appreciation of what is salient for the social partner from that person's emotional perspective (Halpern, 2001). Although identifying another's emotion may be a first step in the empathic process, such as when one notices that her friend standing in the corner at a party appears sad, an empathic process stopping at this point is unlikely to lead one to understand *why* the person is sad. Unfortunately, most empirical paradigms only measure whether or not an observer detects and properly labels the emotion of another (i.e., empathic accuracy) rather than examining whether the observer learned anything more about what the other person was sad or angry *about*. Yet across all interpersonal contexts, be they with parents and children, spouses, or negotiators, curiosity to learn more so as to better imagine another's emotional point of view is crucial to empathic communication.

Such understanding of the specific emotional meaning of a situation from the social partner's perspective has a great deal of clinical relevance in medical settings. Emotion labeling and conveying to the social partner too generic an understanding in the absence of curiosity in the patient-physician interaction could inhibit trust that facilitates patient disclosure, a chief predictor of positive health outcomes in patients (Suchman, Markakis, Beckman, & Frankel, 1997). For example, a patient learning that she has cancer may respond with anger toward her physician upon receiving her diagnosis. The physician's labeling of her anger ("I see that you are angry") or affective matching of the anger ("I'm so angry that you have cancer!") are both inadequate responses, and in our view not demonstrative of

full-fledged empathy. Instead, the physician might go further to express curiosity about what is the worst aspect of having cancer for this particular individual, and learn that this patient's anger is actually directed toward herself for engaging in poor health behaviors in the past (e.g., smoking). In the latter situation, the physician will have captured the personally significant relation of the patient with the diagnosis, as well as possible person-specific information relevant to her condition that may facilitate appropriate healthcare administration. Thus, although individuals may be highly skilled at labeling others' emotional expressions, such accuracy may carry little meaning in real-life interpersonal situations if not complemented with a curiosity to appreciate the social partner's perceived relation with the environment.

Insofar as the successful use of empathy in interpersonal contexts depends on the empathizer's attempting to grasp the perspective of another person, empathy is both affective and cognitive in its aims. That is, emotional resonance with another serves the goal of attempting to imagine and understand what it is like to be another person, with all its complexities. Thus, in the successful deployment of interpersonal empathy, affective and cognitive processes are interactive, not independent (see Halpern, 2001, for a detailed discussion). In the previous example, the mother who resonated with her son's upset feelings experienced those feelings as anger (influenced by her own perception of the situation) and then projected that he was angry. She engaged in the cognitive goal of perspective taking, but her view of what his emotion was about was inaccurate as it was merely informed by emotional resonance and not by grasping specific information about *his* relational world.

Crucially, empathy is more accurate when the cognitive activity of perspective taking involves more than projection. This is why we emphasize the importance of curiosity to learn more about another's specific perspective on his or her social world in the empathic process. In other words, we view empathy not as putting *oneself* in another's shoes; rather, empathy is about imagining what it is like to be the *other person* in that person's shoes.

### *Empathy is a Dynamic Process*

Without tracking the unfolding of empathy from an initial noticing of the social partner's emotions to a full understanding of individuals' relation with their perceived context, we may be missing the nature of the construct itself. Unlike emotion, which is conceptualized as unfolding over time (e.g., Frijda, 1986; Kuppens, 2015), the temporal dynamics of empathy have been underemphasized in the theoretical and empirical literature. Empathy is neither an instantaneous phenomenon nor a static personality trait. Rather, it involves dynamic emotional attunement (Halpern, 2001) and a communicative dialogue (Hollan, 2008; Kupetz, 2014) between people in real time. One is rarely 100% accurate in his or her initial empathic attempts and instead must engage in an iterative process involving feedback from the other, and subsequent adjustment of one's behavior in response to such feedback (Broome, 1993; Halpern, 2001; Hollan, 2008; Kupetz, 2014).

The importance of empathy as a dynamic process can be recognized when one considers that emotions constantly fluctuate between individuals during social interactions (see Butler, 2015). Although empirical research on empathy might lead one to believe that the social world consists of disembodied faces appearing on a screen at a single point in time for the individual to label, real-world interpersonal interactions in which empathy occurs are neither temporally singular nor static. Swann (1984) elegantly describes how research on interpersonal processes that equate person perception (i.e., our understanding of others' behaviors, beliefs, intentions, desires, etc.) with object perception (i.e., the physical properties of an object) falsely assumes that such person-relevant variables are static. However, research on empathy has largely failed to consider this important argument. One must flexibly and continuously attune oneself to others' emotions in order to successfully empathize.

Returning to the example of parent-adolescent conflict in which the mother engaged with curiosity about her adolescent's perspective, the mother's mislabeling of the adolescent's withdrawal as anger in response to his phone being taken away could result in a temporary moment of empathic inaccuracy. If this scenario occurred in a typical laboratory experiment (e.g., a vignette study), the parent would be labeled as low in empathic accuracy. However, the mother demonstrating subsequent curiosity to appreciate the specific nature of her son's emotional reaction may lead the adolescent to disclose his true emotional state and allow the parent to successfully empathize with her child. This process of emotional attunement has been described as "corrective" in the sense that individuals may initially be inaccurate in their assumptions about another's emotions (Broome, 1993). Without addressing the importance of continuous emotional attunement between individuals, our understanding of the dynamic, interpersonal aspects of empathy will remain severely limited.

Methodological techniques from other areas of research conducted in psychology, cognitive science, and related fields may aid the study of empathy in dynamic contexts. One promising approach comes from the emotion coregulation literature. Butler (2011) elegantly outlines various ways of studying interpersonal aspects of emotion and emotion regulation, including statistical, graphical, and mathematical models of how the emotions of one person influence those of another over time. Such approaches have allowed researchers to differentiate emotion contagion and synchrony (Feldman, 2006; Randall, Corkery, Duggi, Kamble, & Butler, 2011), whether individuals' up- or down-regulate one another's emotions (Lougheed, Hollenstein, Lichtwarck-Aschoff, & Granic, 2015), and whether higher levels of physiological linkage are associated with greater empathic accuracy (e.g., Levenson & Ruef, 1992) and relationship satisfaction (Helm, Sbarra, & Ferrer, 2014).

A recent study by Main, Paxton, and Dale (2016) used recurrence quantification analysis (a dynamic systems approach to studying coordination patterns) to explore empathic communication in the context of parent-adolescent conflict discussions. This study found that the extent to which both parents and adolescents engaged in a turn-taking pattern of validation of and interest in the

other's point of view (i.e., one person displayed validation or interest followed by the conversational partner reciprocating these communicative behaviors within 30 seconds) was associated with dyadic perception of how well the conflict was handled. In other words, *mutual* empathic communication during conflict that follows a temporal structure is an important feature of successful conflict management in this population. Work by Loughheed et al. (2015) using a similar analytic approach (survival analysis) found that parental support (including validation) of children's emotions effectively down-regulates children's negative emotions. In addition to coding interpersonal communication behaviors, some adult research involves participants' continuous ratings of their own emotions and the social partner's behavior (Levenson & Ruef, 1992; Overall, Fletcher, & Kenny, 2012). This method allows researchers to study empathy using a truly dyadic approach by measuring not only empathic behaviors, but also how such behaviors are *perceived* by the social partner.

Work in linguistics offers another promising methodological approach to studying empathy in a dynamic fashion. Kupetz (2014) employed conversation analysis to examine the temporal unfolding of empathy during conversations between adults about personally significant matters (for other excellent examples of emotion research using conversational analysis methods see Soronjen & Peräkylä, 2012). Researchers used a coding system that incorporated elements of facial expression, voice tone, gesture, and verbal content to determine "empathic events" during the conversations. The study found that empathic displays early in the conversations were short and superficial (e.g., raised eyebrows to demonstrate interest), but over time became more substantial and verbal in content (e.g., statements of understanding or curiosity). Kupetz argues that it is not the behaviors themselves that are inherently empathic, but rather *how the behaviors are situated in the sequence of the interaction* that makes them empathic. For example, verbal statements of validation offered too early in an interaction may discourage the person with whom the social partner is empathizing with from continuing to describe his experiences and feelings, and thus prevent further empathy from developing between the interactive partners.

The aforementioned approach highlights the importance of considering how behaviors are sequentially situated within emotional contexts, not necessarily the structural features of the behaviors themselves. Taken together, this work underscores the significant opportunities for studying empathy in a dynamic fashion.

### *Empathy is Culturally Situated*

An interpersonal approach to the study of empathy necessitates acknowledging that such interactions occur within a larger socio-cultural context. Developmental research has found that children from East and South Asian backgrounds are less likely than their American and Canadian counterparts to display empathic concern and are more likely to display empathic distress (Cassels, Chan, Chung, & Birch, 2010; Trommsdorff, Friedlmeier, & Mayer, 2007). Interestingly, a recent study examining relations between cultural orientations and prosocial tendencies (i.e., dispositional and situational sympathy and prosocial behavior) found

that Chinese American children from immigrant families who identified with American culture were more prosocial than Chinese American children who identified with Chinese culture (Main, Zhou, Liew, & Lee, 2016). While this research provides insight into possible differences in mean levels of empathy across cultures, one should not necessarily draw the conclusion that individuals from "Eastern" cultures are less empathic than those from "Western" cultures. Rather, how empathy is experienced and expressed likely varies as a function of cultural context and values.

Such variability in the experience and expression of empathy across cultures may be accounted for in several ways. First, the causes, consequences, and display rules of emotions are influenced by one's cultural context (Matsumoto, 2007). For example, in an independence-oriented culture, anger may be motivated by a thwarted personal goal, whereas in a more collectively oriented culture anger can be the consequence of another person having shamed one's family. Anthropological work by Hollan and Throop on the Toraja and Yapese people in rural Indonesia has demonstrated that it is considered culturally inappropriate to express greediness, anger, and resentment in Toraja culture, but socially acceptable to convey vulnerability as an appeal for empathy from others (Hollan, 2008). Conversely, among the Yapese, actively concealing one's emotions from others is considered more appropriate (Hollan & Throop, 2011).

Second, such differences in how the emoter may signal his needs also impacts how the perceiver is likely to respond, and thereby communicate empathy. Again, anthropological work demonstrates differences in the extent to which cultures value emotional expressivity and encourage responses from others. Specifically, a social partner's approach in response to emotional appeals is valued among the Toraja, while avoidance is emphasized among the Yapese to minimize the possibility of exacerbating another's distress and allowing the person a chance to calm down on his own (Hollan, 2012; Hollan & Throop, 2011). This contrasts with the typical conceptualization of empathy in Western culture, which emphasizes approaching others in need (e.g., Batson et al., 1987) and overt prosocial behaviors (e.g., Eisenberg, Fabes, & Spinrad, 2006). Furthermore, as previously discussed, empathy is often conceptualized as a passive experiencing of another's emotions that may or may not lead to prosocial action (e.g., Batson et al., 1987; Hoffman, 2000). However, many South Pacific cultures view empathy as an active, instrumental response (often expressed through the exchange of goods) rather than a passive sharing of another's emotional experience (Hollan & Throop, 2011; von Poser, 2011). Thus, although the underlying function(s) of empathy may be universal, specific behaviors considered empathic vary across cultures.

Third, there is variation across cultures regarding the extent to which people believe individuals can access others' emotional states. Indeed, theorists across multiple disciplines have noted that it may be problematic to assume we share another's emotional experience, as such projection can lead to misunderstanding and ethnocentrism (Geertz, 1984; Hollan, 2008). Thus, understanding a social partner from a different culture than one's own necessitates a deep understanding of that person's unique cultural circumstances rather than focusing on shared experiences, which may be few and far between (Hollan, 2008;

Wikan, 1992). We argue that the cross-cultural study of empathy necessitates that all aspects of empathy, even its basic definition, be culturally situated. Specifically, understanding (a) how emotions and empathy are experienced and expressed differently across cultures, and (b) a focus on the uniqueness of others' experiences rather than on shared emotional experiences is likely to better capture how empathy is culturally situated.

## Conclusions

Toward the end of Siddhartha's journey, his path once again crosses with that of his childhood friend, Govinda. Siddhartha discovers that Govinda has persisted on his path of intrapersonal reflection, continuously seeking without finding. By contrast, Siddhartha's interpersonal path of curiosity and discovery has given him insight into understanding and appreciating the lives of others, "their vanities, trivialities, and desires no longer seemed absurd to him; they had become understandable, loveable, and even worthy of respect" (Hesse, 1951, p. 130). Although we make no promises of achieving nirvana, we believe the field of emotion research would benefit from more researchers taking a path similar to the one of Siddhartha to better understand the dynamic, relational nature of empathy.

While empathy requires two or more people to occur, it is surprising that the empirical literature on this important topic is solitary in nature and hold few implications for how empathy plays out in a dynamic fashion in real-life social interaction. This review illustrates how focus on the interpersonal and relational functions of empathy and its dynamic nature can illuminate our understanding of how empathy functions in everyday life. We have argued that empathy has eluded scholars in part because there has been considerable emphasis on the *form* of empathy at the expense of its *function*. In other words, different types of intrapsychic processes and communicative behaviors that have been characterized as empathy (e.g., mirroring facial expressions, sharing affect, labeling emotions in others) may be demonstrative of empathy in some contexts. However, what determines whether such behaviors are empathic depends on various aspects of the *interpersonal context* within which such behaviors occur.

We believe that a definition of empathy based on its function is important to move the field forward and achieve greater clarity of the construct. Even so, we recognize that the theoretical and empirical study of empathy as proposed in this article is not without challenge. The human mind is complex, and adding social partners into the equation adds a layer of complexity with which many researchers may be wary to contend. However, studying intrapersonal processes misses the inherently interpersonal nature of empathy. Despite such challenges, we believe it is essential that empathy researchers find creative and ecologically valid ways to deepen our understanding of this important topic in the study of emotion.

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