

The Anthropology of Empathy: Experiencing the Lives of Others in Pacific Societies. Douglas W. Hollan and C. Jason Throop, eds. Berghahn Books: New York, NY. 2011. 1 + 233 pp.

Reviewed by:

Webb Keane, Professor of Anthropology, University of Michigan

One of the most familiar contributions the Pacific languages have made to English is *aloha*, roughly translatable as love, compassion, concern. It is fitting then, that this volume takes the Pacific as a context for examining “empathy.” This volume grew out of sessions held over several annual meetings of the Association for Social Anthropology in Oceania. The tight-knit result demonstrates the power of regional comparison to yield findings of wide relevance from closely observed ethnography. For if what Doug Hollan and Jason Throop call the “love—compassion—concern—pity complex” is of special concern in Pacific societies, they also suggest empathy underlies sociality, the very “hallmark of our species” (p. 1).

Hollan and Throop’s thoughtful introduction lays out some basic considerations in approaching this slippery topic. Empathy centers on some capacity to enter into the first person perspective of another, while remaining aware it is another’s. With a light touch the editors sketch distinctions among cultural styles: self-revealing or self-concealing, self-effacing or self-projecting, and other-approaching, other-respecting, or other-anticipating. They make clear that empathy is neither knowledge *about*, nor a full entry *into*, another’s experiences. Knowing what another is going through doesn’t necessitate any particular emotional response. And full merging would cease to be truly empathic, since one wouldn’t be able to distinguish between one’s own feelings and another’s. This seems clear in principle, but the story quickly becomes complicated, for as the editors note, empathy combines cognition and emotion. The question of just what we are to make of knowledge about others haunts many of the chapters in this book. It turns out to be hard to keep distinct (a) tacit local knowledge and skills, (b) explicit indigenous concepts, and (c) people’s actual responses to one another. Whether or not people’s psychological concepts shape their empathic responses, they surely affect what will count for them—and a fortiori for the ethnographer—as *evidence* of others’ experience.

The ethnographic cases come from Hollan (Toraja), Throop (Yap), Elfriede Hermann (Banabans in Fiji), Maria Lepowsky (Vanatinai), Jeannette Mageo (Samoa), Roger Ivar Lohmann (Asabano), Richard Feinberg (Anuta), and Anita von Poser (Bosmun). These are all deeply informed ethnographers, in most cases with long experience in their fieldsites, who rarely let a simplistic theory override the complexity of their data. As a result, these chapters offer many fascinating threads one might choose to follow, of which I just note a few.

The body provides various ways of understanding otherness: for instance, whereas Banabans stress the hiddenness of interiors, Asabano emphasize how possessing similar bodies allows for shared experiences. If the viscera represent the inaccessibility of others’ experiences, eyes may render them available. People who stress the value of legibility, like Bosmun, keep their gaze open to one another or engage in what Mageo calls “gaze-ship” (p. 71). Conversely, others (Yap, Toraja) recognizing openness as a threat, avoid eye contact. Thus the same possibility -- that eyes might grant access to others -- is acknowledged from opposing stances. As an affordance, the gaze can be suppressed or elaborated depending on local concerns. In

some other places, the handling of eye contact is crucial to the everyday life of gender and power differences, topics which receive less attention in this volume than they might have.

Empathy depends as much on the efforts others make to reveal or conceal themselves as on one's own sensibilities. Bosmun (in striking contrast to most communities here) expect mutual trust and open hearts, at least sometimes, so they cultivate habits of self-disclosure. By contrast, in Yap self-governance involves arts of concealment. Both demonstrate not only distributed agency but also links between empathy and ethics. Whereas in Anuta, the moral claims of *aropa* (love, pity, compassion) ought only to extend to kin, Banabans (unsurprisingly for a refugee population) emphasize hospitality; for them being pitiable constitutes a moral claim to political recognition.

Openness and avoidance give rise to variations in what I have called "semiotic ideology," local assumptions about what counts as a sign, how it should be interpreted and whether it should be trusted (Keane 2007). Empathy and ideas *about* empathy can loop back on one another. This is both a theoretical and methodological issue, since the fieldworker depends on evidence about other people that is in turn mediated by what they themselves consider to be evidence. Lohmann asks, "How can we come as close as possible to an objective understanding of another person's subjectivity?" (p. 112; see also Lepowsky). But many of the people described in this book would react with alarm at this aspiration. As the editors observe, "first person-like knowledge of others is rarely, if ever, considered an unambiguously good thing" (p. 6).

Tones of wariness, anxiety, and fear run through these accounts; other people can be a problem. It's no surprise to find some version of the "opacity" claim (pp. 9-10), that one cannot know others, appears in every chapter. But this volume makes clear the assertion is not to be taken at face value. Off record people speculate about others' inner states. Limits to public expression of those speculations shows that the suppression and performance of people's accessibility to one another reflect key problems emerging from particular ways of organizing collective existence.

Social and political life have changed dramatically in the Pacific. How resilient is any given affective style -- does it have a different temporality than, say, economics or politics? How independent is it from changing knowledge systems? Since much of the book is presented in the ethnographic present, it's sometimes hard to tell. Of particular relevance are Christian ideas about pity, interiority, and equality, about which there is surely much more to be said than the rather fleeting references here.

I close by endorsing a remark in Alan Rumsey's insightful afterword, that discussions of empathy tend to presuppose an initial condition of separateness that is to be overcome. Instead he proposes we see empathy "as always necessarily involving a self-other relation, in which neither self nor other can be taken as entirely given -- as existing prior to the relationship" but rather being *produced* by that relationship (p. 220). There is considerable evidence in the rich materials here to substantiate that idea.

REFERENCES CITED

Keane, Webb

2007 *Christian Moderns: Freedom and Fetish in the Mission Encounter*. Berkeley, CA:
University of California Press.