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# Does Empathy Contribute to Intergroup Solidarity? Navigating the Pitfalls of Empathy in the Pursuit of Racial Justice

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## Abstract

This article describes some of the pitfalls of empathy as a tool for supporting intergroup solidarity and examines how best to navigate these pitfalls. In cases where racial injustice is structural and complex, those who are not directly targeted by an injustice may fail to appropriately recognize and respond to injustice, undermining the political solidarity required to make social change. This deficiency in moral knowledge and motivation raises the question of whether relying on empathy in cases of racial injustice could actually be undermining anti-racism. The article describes two ways in which empathy tends to fail as a moral-epistemic tool for recognizing and responding to racial injustice: centering the privileged perspective and generalized projecting. Nevertheless, we should avoid drawing the conclusion that empathy has no place in coalitional politics. This article draws a distinction between transitory empathy, which is experienced as a passing moment in time, and accretionary empathy, which is developed over an extended period of time. The practices associated with transitory empathy are more susceptible to failure, while the practices associated with accretionary empathy can make vital contributions to intergroup solidarity.

In her 2018 MLK Jr. Commemorative Lecture, Kathleen Cleaver—longtime social justice organizer and former communications secretary of the Black Panthers—described some of the challenges facing those who seek to resist persistent injustices in the present day. One of the most significant challenges has to do with intergroup solidarity. In the Q&A following Cleaver’s talk, audience members urged Cleaver to address the socio-political problem of uniting activists across positionalities and between organizations. Cleaver recognized that the failure of solidarity when one is not personally threatened by an injustice results in divisions that significantly undermine social justice movements. In particular, she noted that the nature of racial injustice has changed over the last several decades, and that the urgency of injustices is often less visceral. She reasoned that social justice movements are now “more sophisticated; it’s more specific and less immediately comprehensible than ‘we want the vote’ and ‘we want to end

segregation'... The things happening are more hidden than those issues were, even though they are still about this violence. It's the issue of what feels like a crisis to enough people" (Dennis 2017).

Presumably, Cleaver's point about the changing nature of racial injustice reflects the recognition that, rather than being encoded in overtly discriminatory laws, racism is systemic—embedded in countless ways in institutional rules, interactive routines, the mobilization of resources, as well as the built environment.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, the impacts of racial injustice are dynamic: sometimes the injustices are complex, subtle, cumulative, shifting, or indirect—and, of course, sometimes they are overt. Cleaver states that, although racial injustices are "still about ... violence," they are not always immediately understood as violence, because it is violence that occurs within the context of laws, institutions, and actors that present themselves as colorblind.

Cleaver's comments about the challenge of generating intergroup solidarity in the post-Civil Rights Era point to the fact that those who are not, themselves, the target of a particular injustice may have difficulty experiencing morally and politically motivating *empathy* for those who are targeted by an injustice, particularly when the nature of that injustice is less immediately recognizable than that of Jim Crow laws. For example, Latinx people living primarily in rural and suburban areas may not immediately grasp the injustice of closing polling stations in urban areas where primarily African Americans reside.<sup>2</sup> To fully appreciate this injustice would require more than knowing that, for example, the nearest place to vote is now eight, rather than two miles away. One would also need to appreciate the history of underdevelopment and underrepresentation in these communities; the difficulty of getting from one side of town to another; and the way having one large polling station rather than two smaller polling stations would impact wait times. In Cleaver's words, the injustice might not "[feel] like a crisis." It might not generate an urgent emotional response, or be perceived as violation so significant that one is moved to take up the agenda of the targeted group, where one is willing to put oneself at risk to end the injustice to which members of the other group is being subjected.

If empathy for oppressed groups is less likely to arise automatically in cases where injustices are structural, that is, if racial injustice is failing to immediately register as a crisis for those who are not targeted by that injustice, then perhaps empathy is just not the best tool for the job. In other words, empathy doesn't lead to an adequate appraisal of the contemporary political landscape. Put differently, perhaps empathy is failing to give people accurate moral information about racial injustice and, in turn, fails to sufficiently motivate solidarity. Empathy would thus be falling short as an epistemic, moral, and political tool. Relying on empathy in cases of racial injustice, then, could actually be *undermining* anti-racism. Perhaps people should avoid making the effort to intentionally cultivate empathy for members of other groups and focus their moral-political energies elsewhere. It is this concern that leads me in this article to ask: Does empathy support or threaten solidarity in cases of where racial injustice is systemic or complex, and where one of the parties is not, themselves, directly threatened by the injustice?

To think through the limitations of empathy for intergroup solidarity, I turn to the work of scholars of race Alexis Shotwell, Helen Ngo, Keisha Ray, and Mariana Ortega. These philosophers have issued important warnings about the ways that empathy, when experienced by those who are not the target of racial injustice, can actually *harm* those who are racialized and ultimately compromise efforts made towards racial justice. In this article, I examine the work of these thinkers in order to clarify what, exactly, is wrong with relying on empathy as a moral-epistemic tool for recognizing and

responding to systemic racial injustice. Two sets of concerns about practicing empathy emerge. First, efforts to empathize can lead to the failure to decenter the privileged perspective in order to understand another person's experience; and second, intentional empathy can lead to *generalized projecting*, whereby the other person is seen as a mere instantiation of the social group to which they belong. I propose that we heed these warnings about ways that empathy can be practiced improperly.

Nevertheless, we should avoid drawing the conclusion that empathy has no place in coalitional politics. Empathy can still contribute in important ways to racial solidarity, even—or especially—in cases where one is not subject to the same injustices as someone else and where the injustice is subtle or structural. I make this case by proposing a distinction between *transitory empathy*—empathy that is experienced as a passing moment in time—and *accretionary empathy*—empathy that is cultivated over an extended duration of time. I find that practices aimed at inducing transitory empathy are more likely to result in self-centering and generalized projecting. Accretionary empathy is less susceptible to these harms. Taking the work of María Lugones (1987) as a point of reference, I sketch some of the theoretical contours of how we might practice accretionary empathy in ways that further avoid perpetuating racial injustice.

### Defining empathy in the context of racial injustice

In the last decade, scholarly treatments of the role of empathy in moral life have proliferated.<sup>3</sup> While the idea that empathy leads to increased concern about the welfare of others has empirical support<sup>4</sup> and might be intuitive to many people, a number of scholars have raised doubts about the relation between empathy and morality.<sup>5</sup> They question whether we should be taking into consideration the thoughts and feelings that are generated through empathy—much less working to cultivate our tendencies to empathize—in order to be more moral.<sup>6</sup> For instance, Paul Bloom (2016) contends that acting ethically requires us to emotionally *detach* from others' suffering. That is, while *cognitively* grasping another's perspective may be important, one is more likely to respond ethically when one does not feel what the other person feels. Another critic of empathy, Jesse Prinz (2011), holds that empathy is necessary neither for moral judgment nor for moral motivation. He finds that other moral emotions are likely better suited for the job. In spite of this current debate about the value of empathy to morality, philosophers and social scientists have paid relatively little attention to empathy as it relates to racial injustice.<sup>7</sup>

One thing that is clear from the literature on empathy is that empathy is not easy to define, and different definitions can get in the way of assessing the promise and limitations of empathy. One reason it is hard to define and evaluate is that, as a number of scholars have pointed out, empathy is a complex phenomenon. Psychologist C. Daniel Batson (2011) identifies eight ways that the term “empathy” is used in the scholarly literature.<sup>8</sup> Elisa Aaltola describes six varieties of empathy,<sup>9</sup> and, more recently, Samuel Fleischacker has settled on a more modest two forms of empathy.<sup>10</sup> In addition to these varieties of empathy, empathy also seems to exist in multiple modes and temporalities, and can engage a variety of faculties and to differing degrees, depending on the situation.<sup>11</sup> For example, when reading a letter written by someone who is far away, imaginative perspective-taking is a more apt process for eliciting empathy than mimicry, which involves automatically mirroring the expressions of another person. This complexity in modality makes it more challenging to normatively evaluate empathy in terms of its conduciveness to moral or political ends.

Because of this complexity, it is important to start with an account of empathy that is both broad and consistent with folk intuitions, and which proponents and critics of empathy could agree upon. Beginning with a broad account gives us room to later parse the nuances of which aspects of empathy are better or worse, and when. In this way, we can avoid overgeneralizing about the usefulness of empathy. We can also avoid begging the question of whether empathy is conducive to social justice as a result of an overly narrow definition.

We might begin by identifying a paradigm scenario for empathy: perceiving the distress of another person and feeling distressed in response.<sup>12</sup> The minimal conditions for this scenario are (1) experiencing a congruent emotional response—an emotional response that reflects another person’s reaction to their experience—and (2) the accurate perception of the features of the other person’s situation that give rise to their response. Put simply, empathy involves both “sharing a feeling” with another person and understanding why the other person is having that feeling. Both conditions must be present for empathy to exist (Segal 2019).<sup>13</sup> This description of empathy highlights that empathy is both an affective and epistemic achievement. It requires the accurate perception of the relevant features of another’s situation, as well as a correct interpretation of the behavior and emotional expressions of the other person. This achievement is likely to require that one engage in some set of practices in order to become more attuned to those expressions. Empathy is thus not always a merely passive response; it can also be actively cultivated by the empathizer. For example, in attempting to respond well to a small child’s contrariness, it may be useful to learn a bit about developmental psychology. Learning more about how children individuate is a method by which a caregiver can come to better understand the child’s frustrating behavior and the needs that are being expressed through that behavior. It is the process by which a caregiver can come to better empathize with the child. Because empathy involves grasping the relevant features of another’s situation, the practices one engages in in order to arrive at this kind of understanding are central to empathy.

### Limitations of empathy

With a preliminary sketch of empathy in hand, I turn now to the question of whether empathy supports intergroup solidarity. At first glance, it seems clear that empathy is an important moral-epistemic tool; an indispensable resource for combating racial injustice. If empathy is defined as experiencing distress in response to another’s distressing situation, it seems like it would be a necessary experience for those who aim to resist injustices faced by groups that one is not a member of. Empathy is powerful when another person’s concerns resonate deeply, almost as if they have become one’s own. Such an experience can motivate us to take action on others’ behalf. Indeed, this is what Hoffman (2014) has in mind when he argues that empathy plays an essential role in social justice work. In a nutshell, Hoffman’s view is that empathy for victims of injustice can lead large groups of people to humanize those who are marginalized, and thereby move societies to change oppressive laws.<sup>14</sup> To support his argument, Hoffman gives the example of legal scholar Yale Kamisar, who wrote scathing articles about police brutality that were a major factor in the 1966 *Miranda v Arizona* decision, which ultimately won the accused the right to remain silent. Kamisar’s articles, Hoffman argues, are written in the language of empathy, insofar as the writing “selectively focus[es] one’s attention and point[s] up in fine detail what is happening to victims and their physical and psychological distress” (90). The articles move readers to

enter into the perspectives of others who are experiencing ordeals about which readers have no first-hand experience.

We should not conclude too quickly, however, that empathy always contributes to anti-racist efforts. In the remainder of this section, I turn to the work scholars of race have done to explain why we should be wary of empathy.

### *Centering the privileged perspective*

Scholars of race Alexis Shotwell (2011) and Helen Ngo (2017) call our attention to those who are on the receiving end of others' empathy and who are harmed by it. They point out that those who engage in efforts to empathize with those who are experiencing racial injustice may inadvertently center their own perspective, rather than really grasp the significant features of others' experiences. Shotwell is explicitly critical of the view that "antiracist praxis is grounded in the experience of white empathy with the plight of those subject to racism" (106). She reasons that empathy requires us to imaginatively project how we might feel in another person's place. Such a projection, however, is ultimately rooted in one's own experience. In cases of racialized inequality, this analogizing undermines its own aim because a central feature of whiteness is that it tends to center white experience. Shotwell explains, "Because so much of white people's experience appears as a norm to us, the work of making the experiences of racialized others analogous to white experience threatens to recapitulate a dynamic in which whiteness is the norm against which otherness is measured, defined, and understood" (2011, 109). Self-referential imaginative projection covers over the ways in which white experience is fundamentally different from the experience of racialized others, which cannot be understood in terms of a white frame of reference. Shotwell contends that, rather than rest on empathy, "racial re-formation will need to avoid a reduction of real difference into analogous sameness. It will need to de-center white experience, rather than attempting to bring 'otherness' into relation with a white norm" (109).

In a similar vein, Ngo raises concerns about misguided antiracist efforts that encourage people to imagine themselves in others' shoes. Specifically, Ngo is critical of projects that attempt to simulate the experience of racism for whites. These include, for example, the smartphone app called Everyday Racism, where users are invited to "play" a racialized character for a week in order to better understand the experience of racism, and Hijab Day, where non-Muslim women are invited to wear a hijab for a day to experience what it is like to be a Muslim woman in the West. Ngo argues that, while these initiatives might be well-intentioned, they do more harm than good. The simulations offer very thin versions of racialized experience that do not reckon with the epistemological and phenomenological complexity and gravity entailed in the embodied experience of living as a racialized subject. Empathy, in this case, amounts to a kind of shallow identity tourism. The problem is not merely that the simulations are inadequate and, as a result, misleading. The initiatives also do a number of more significant harms. For one, they suggest to participants that having engaged in a simulation will give them some epistemic authority on the matter of racialized experience. This epistemic arrogance encourages them to believe they are now in a position to doubt the accounts given by people of color of their own experiences of racism (113–14). Furthermore, creating so-called "experiences of racism" that a person can opt into or out of "seriously diminishes and trivializes the lives, identities, and struggles" of racialized veiled Muslim women and people of color (117).

Ngo proposes that, rather than engaging in a simulation so that they can see for themselves, those seeking to engage in genuine anti-racist solidarity ought to put more effort into “amplifying the voices of those usually marginalized, underscoring their epistemic authority,” and engaging in “some critical self-reflection into how one might respond as a bystander to future occurrences of racism” and “into the invisible sources and manifestations of one’s own white privilege” (120). Ngo thus suggests that the goal for those who wish to engage in anti-racist solidarity should not be to gain a kind of first-hand knowledge of others’ experiences, but rather to recognize others’ authority about the nature of their lived experiences, and to reflect on one’s own positionality in racist structures.

Shotwell and Ngo show the epistemic and moral limitations of members of dominant groups engaging in imaginative exercises of putting themselves in the shoes of members of marginalized groups. It is difficult to spot these limitations in Hoffman’s example of Kamisar’s work on the right to remain silent. In reading about brutal policing tactics, almost anyone can imagine what it would be like to be physically and psychologically abused by police and pressured into speaking. In cases where intergroup solidarity is called for, however—where the harms of an injustice are far removed from one’s own lived experiences because they are predicated on a social identity that one does not hold—imaginative exercises based on one’s own frame of reference are inadequate as epistemic tools. For instance, in comparison to the police brutality case, it would likely be far more difficult for a non-Latinx, native-English speaker to grasp the countless ways in which people who speak primarily Spanish face discrimination and lack of access to basic goods and services in the US. Attempts to imagine this experience are likely to be inadequate because, even though one can imagine an inability to communicate well in a foreign country, this imaginative picture would be inevitably tethered to the privileged viewpoint of someone whose legal and cultural belonging is assumed. For many Latinxs who are non-English proficient, or who speak with an accent, their use of language in the US (whether “broken” English or Spanish) and the very sound of their voice makes them vulnerable to hostility, as it elicits racist stereotypes and raises questions about the legitimacy of their membership in the community.<sup>15</sup>

Although Shotwell and Ngo do not deny that efforts to better understand the experiences of others play a part in social justice movements, they are critical of practices of empathy that proceed on the basis that one’s own first-hand experience can somehow lead to a greater understanding of others’ experience. Indeed, when members of dominant groups attempt to “walk in the shoes” of those from marginalized backgrounds in order to get a sense of what their experience is like, they are likely to find themselves re-entrenched in their own perspectives and overlooking important differences between their experience and the experiences of those who are marginalized. What pro-empathy advocates like Hoffman do not adequately consider, then, is that *social inequality is a crucial mediating factor* in the way that empathy functions in intergroup contexts. One way to understand this point is that, insofar as widely held negative stereotypes influence a society’s perception of marginalized social groups, people generally will be less likely to empathize with members of those groups.<sup>16</sup> The insight from Ngo and Shotwell’s work is slightly different, however. They indicate that a privileged standpoint, in particular, is a barrier to appreciating experiences of racial injustice, especially when experiences of racism are subtle or systemic.<sup>17</sup> Empathy is systematically undermined in ways that correspond to racial privilege and disadvantage. Those in positions of privilege may do more harm than good, particularly when they attempt to

understand others' experiences by engaging in practices that simulate or replicate those experiences for themselves.

Identities, however, are complex. Each person belongs to numerous social groups, and most people belong to some groups which are relatively privileged while also belonging to some groups which are oppressed. Additionally, some social identities might be privileged in some social contexts and disadvantaged in others. Given that identities are intersectional in this way, there are questions to consider about whether experiences of disadvantage or oppression in one domain enable a person to better understand another person's oppression, even when it arises in a different domain. For example, would a white man who is disabled and trans have experiences of oppression that make him more empathetic towards someone who subject to racist oppression? Would he have greater epistemic and affective potential for empathy with oppressed racial groups than with a non-disabled, cis white man? Or would someone who experiences racism in one way—such as an Asian woman in the US—be more likely to understand, and more able to empathize with, someone who experiences racism in another way—say, a black man in the US—than a white person would be able to?<sup>18</sup>

I suspect that, yes, *to a limited extent*, experiencing oppression in one domain creates opportunities to empathize with someone who is oppressed along another domain. Social psychological research confirms that people in power have lower levels of empathy compared to those who lack power (van Kleef et al. 2008). They view themselves as different from those who are less powerful and are not as interested in them (Hogeveen et al. 2014). Unsurprisingly, then, they tend to engage less in perspective-taking (Guinote 2007). Conversely, as Fricker (2007) notes, having first-hand experience of being on the receiving end of prejudice might give someone insight into how prejudice could influence their own perceptions (97). They might thus be more inclined to be consciously correct for potential prejudices.

We would be wrong, however, to believe that being oppressed along one axis provides one with epistemic access to experiences of oppression along another axis. Nabina Liebow and Rachel Levit Ades (2022, 2) identify this mistaken sense of epistemic authority as *synecdoche epistemic arrogance*, in which someone who has privilege along a particular axis assumes that they know what it is like to be oppressed along that axis, because they have had some limited experience that they falsely compare to the whole, much more complex experience of oppression. Liebow and Levit Ades contend that experiences of one kind of oppression do not grant a person epistemic authority on experiences of other kinds of oppression. The assumption that it does is not only an “epistemically vicious way of thinking” (3); it also results in a variety of moral harms. With respect to empathy, then, the point is that, insofar as one experiences privilege along a certain axis, one runs a risk of centering a privileged perspective when attempting to empathize by way of simulating others' experiences of oppression for themselves.

### *Generalized projecting onto members of other racial groups*

We've seen how attempting to imagine *oneself* in another person's shoes can perpetuate the harms of racism by sidelining the perspectives of those who are oppressed. Scholars have also shown, though, that even some efforts to appreciate the distinctive situation of a targeted social group—to imagine what it's like for *them* to walk in their shoes—can further perpetuate racist oppression.



In her article, “Intersectionality and the Dangers of White Empathy when Treating Black Patients,” bioethicist Keisha Ray recounts an experience of visiting the doctor for hypertension. The doctor prescribed medication that, she reassured Ray, “has been known to work very well for black people.” When Ray returned to the doctor a month later without any improvement in her symptoms, the doctor could not understand why the medication had not been effective. She continued to insist that “this drug is supposed to work for black people.” Rather than pursue an alternate treatment plan, the doctor doubled down on the original approach, sending Ray away with the same medication and dosage. Ray notes that this doctor’s behavior was representative of a pattern of encounters with doctors who dispensed overly generalized care as a result of efforts to be responsive to her *as a black patient*.

Ray’s testimony illustrates a second kind of harm that can result from efforts to empathize with members of a different racial group. Rather than centering one’s own experience, the empathizer in this case centers the experience that they assume members of that group tend to have. Ray notes that “empathy first requires us to identify what makes someone different,” but cautions that exaggerating the differences between people on the basis of a single feature (like skin color) leads to overgeneralization about people who share the feature.

Those who tend to think of themselves as anti-racist and as allies to members of other oppressed groups are at risk of committing this error. Mariana Ortega (2006) analyzes a problem of this sort in her discussion of what she calls “knowing, loving ignorance.” This problem is one in which a person is disposed to empathize with a group’s plight and has a good deal of relevant knowledge about the group, but nevertheless retains a kind of false picture of members of the group. Ortega refines her discussion of “knowing, loving ignorance” by describing its manifestation in some white feminists’ behavior towards women of color. Rather than being merely ignorant, or oblivious to the experiences of women of color, these white feminists are “knowledgeable.” That is, they know and utilize the work of well-known women of color. They are also not merely arrogant, but “loving”: these good-intentioned feminists wish to legitimate, or give voice to, the words of women of color. Nevertheless, they still exhibit ignorance, because they do not see that they are fundamentally concerned with *their own status* “in a field that claims to care about women of color and their thoughts” (62). Furthermore, their theorizing about women of color overgeneralizes. Ortega explains that “knowingly, lovingly ignorant” white feminists “do not check whether in fact their claims about the experience of women of color are being described with attention to detail and with understanding of its subtleties” (62). Ultimately, this ignorance contributes to the marginalization of women of color, who “continue to be misunderstood, underrepresented, homogenized, disrespected, or subsumed under the experience of ‘universal sisterhood’” (62).

Ray and Ortega’s analyses offer a warning about the harm that results when a somewhat knowledgeable, well-meaning empathizer overgeneralizes about what it means to be a member of a racialized group. As Ray explains, “When I go to the doctor, I feel like just another black person. My doctors don’t see me. They don’t see that I am a black person who is also a woman, a professional philosopher, a friend, a runner, a candy aficionado and so forth. They just see a black person.” The would-be empathizer has projected onto the other person in a way that really coheres with the views that they already hold. As Ortega puts it: “The perceiver has ‘invented’ a reality that accords more with his desires and expectations than with the actual state of affairs” (62). The potential harms of attempting to empathize when one is not, oneself, the target



of a given injustice are serious. As Ray's work illustrates, a doctor who continues to prescribe a medication that is not working is putting her patient's health at risk. And, as Ortega's work shows, a scholar who overgeneralizes about women of color perpetuates misunderstandings and furthers their marginalization.

To avoid the dangers of generalized projection, Ray highlights the importance of acknowledging intersectionality by recognizing that people are more than a single identity marker. Like Ngo, Ray suggests that people should be willing "to accept their role in racist institutions" and willing "to confront their own racist behaviors." Turning to the work of Elizabeth Spelman and Lugones, Ortega calls for: understanding a variety of women's experiences and oppressions; not rushing to find similarity or confusing imagining women with knowing them; and not thinking that all differences are the same. Ortega also stresses the need for a deeper investment into the concrete aspects of the everyday lives of women of color, claiming that "theorizing about women of color without checking and questioning their actual lives, without actively trying to participate in their lives, without knowing any flesh-and-blood women of color, or without practical engagement with them, is loving, knowing, ignorance" (2006, 68).

We've seen that empathy as generalized projecting—attempting to imagine what it's like to be another person qua member of an oppressed group—can exacerbate injustice. Perhaps the potential harms of attempts to empathize are so great that we should avoid thinking about empathy as having a role in intergroup solidarity. Ray and Ortega's recommendations highlight that truly understanding and caring about people in ways that do not overgeneralize requires a concerted kind of epistemic activity. It involves working to understand racist institutions; working to recognize the ways in which the empathizer is, themselves, situated within and complicit in those institutions; and working to grasp the way that other individuals are uniquely impacted by those institutions. I turn now to the question of whether there is any way in which empathy positively contributes to this work.

### The value empathy for intergroup solidarity

In the previous section, I described two ways in which efforts to empathize can exacerbate racial injustice: by centering the privileged perspective and by leading one to make generalized projections about members of different racial groups. The critiques of empathy that Shotwell, Ngo, Ray, and Ortega press should be taken seriously. Nevertheless, we ought not to jump to the conclusion that the absence of empathy would be desirable. There are a number of reasons to believe that insufficient empathy would also be detrimental to the pursuit of social justice.

First, it seems clear that a central aspect of racist psychology is the lack of empathy for members of racialized groups. Disparities in the ability to empathize on the basis of race has been shown to cause racial harms. Studies have shown that empathy gaps lead white people to discount the pain felt by black people (Trawalter et al. 2012). Other studies have shown that, when asked to put themselves in a defendant's shoes, white jurors felt less empathy for black defendants than white defendants and gave harsher legal punishment to black defendants than white defendants even when both white and black defendants committed similar crimes (Johnson and Simmons 2002). When directed to empathize, these jurors were not only incapable of extending empathy to black defendants. Their inability to do so directly contributed to the unfair sentencing of defendants on the basis of race. There is no doubt that injustices like these are not limited to the courtroom: failures to empathize with people of color lead to unfair

treatment across countless domains of life. On the other hand, experiences of empathy can lead to a recognition of one's responsibilities to fight against racism. In her investigations of white audiences encountering African American culture, Kimberly Chabot Davis (2004) finds that "identifications with the feelings of African American characters can provoke a critical self-interrogation and a recognition that racism poisons everyone—that it is not merely 'their problem', but rather ours collectively" (410). This recognition, she contends, is a necessary precondition for anti-racist coalitions.

Second, empathy has an epistemic dimension that can be critical to our ability to respond well to others. The sometimes subtle and nuanced information about the emotional states of others that we grasp through sensitive attention to others often allows us to respond more appropriately to their needs. Elisa Aaltola notes that people's emotional lives are not always rational, so attempting to grasp the experience of another person in non-affective terms may generate misunderstandings. She writes, "Efforts towards sheer detachment, aloofness and rational calculus will fail, in their emotional hollowness, to grasp the content of the emotions in others and will be inclined instead to search for logical reasons under the behavior of other subjects" (62). The affective receptivity of empathy, in contrast, enables understanding of others' affective states via affective resonance, which provides critical supplementing information. This receptivity to subtle affective information can be important in political contexts. For instance, it could allow one to grasp the *urgency* of resisting a given injustice. Without experiencing empathy, one can grasp that an injustice is taking place and condemn it. One can know a variety of relevant facts about the situation that would allow them to appreciate aspects of the scope and impact of the injustice. However, without being sensitively, affectively attuned to others, one cannot feel, for example, that suffering which has been ongoing is approaching unbearable and must be addressed *now*, that the energy of this particular social movement is momentous and must be taken advantage of, that a failure to speak up as an ally in this particular moment will be devastating, rather than merely disappointing. However committed one might be to justice, in the absence of empathy, one's moral judgment will fall short if it deviates too far from the actual experiences of people suffering from an injustice.

Third, empathy sometimes—though certainly not always—contributes to moral motivation. A number of scholars have sought to identify ways in which the morally motivating kind might best be cultivated. Focusing on the role of media in eliciting empathy, E. Ann Kaplan (2011) identifies the morally deficient form of empathy as "empty empathy," which involves a "rapid diminution of the affect" and results from the lack of a "socio-political context for actually putting ourselves in the situation of those suffering from catastrophe, for experiencing it deeply and enduringly" (264). Empty empathy, Kaplan explains, leaves one feeling hopeless in the face of others' suffering. "Witnessing," on the other hand is the sort of empathy that leads one to want to see justice done. It "leads to a broader empathic understanding of the meaning of what has been done to victims, of the politics of trauma being possible" (275). Making a similar distinction, though in the context of multicultural education, Megan Boler (1997) distinguishes "passive empathy," which reinscribes a consumptive focus on the other person, from the practice of "testimonial reading," where readers seek greater self-awareness as subjects existing within power relation, and recognize their responsibilities to others in virtue of those relations. Boler writes, "Testimony calls for empathy as necessary to the comprehension of trauma, and necessary to extend cognition to its limits through historical consciousness," but testimonial reading also "recognizes its own limits, obstacles, ignorances, and zones of numbness" and thus prevents one from

assuming one can fully know the other (266). For Kaplan and Boler, morally motivating empathy is more likely to arise when the empathizer is encouraged to reflect upon their relation to the other person and on their responsibilities to take action. Empathy doesn't always lead to moral motivation, but it can be an important contributing factor.

Acknowledging that empathy can sometimes contribute to moral understanding and moral motivation doesn't ultimately address the problem we started with, however. The challenge of the contemporary political landscape is that some people aren't automatically experiencing the right kinds of empathy in cases where racial injustice is covert or complex. Then, their concerted efforts to generate empathy aren't leading to good outcomes. Instead, they are causing harm. We might be inclined to conclude, then, that there is little sense in trying to seek solidarity from those who are not already moved to resist a given injustice.

I think, however, that we should pause before drawing this conclusion. We cannot take for granted, as it can be so tempting to do, that efforts to empathize will always lead to a more just world. Empathizing with someone does not amount to being in solidarity with them. Nevertheless, it's possible to take the abovementioned critiques of empathy into consideration without denying that empathy *can* contribute in important ways to racial solidarity, even—or especially—in cases where one is not subject to the same injustices as someone else, and where the injustice is subtle or structural.

I make this case by offering a distinction between two sorts of empathy. *Transitory empathy* is empathy that passes quickly. An example would be the distress one experiences when reading a brief article about a victim of a hate crime, where the distress quickly lifts as one goes on with their day. The empathy-inducing event is experienced as a moment in time, not connected in a significant way with one's other ongoing concerns. *Accretionary empathy* is empathy that is built up, layer by layer, over an extended period of time. An example would be the experience of shared concerns that arises when one comes to understand the myriad struggles faced by a disabled family member for whom one provides care. Another example would be the accumulating moral outrage of a student learning over the course of many lessons about the violent history of oppression of gay and lesbian people.

These two sorts of empathy differ in both the temporality and depth of the experience. Whereas transitory empathy might be felt intensely, it is shallow and short-lived. Accretionary empathy, though, is developed over long periods of time. Rather than merely dissipating, particular moments of intense empathetic response are grafted onto an accumulating body of knowledge and concern about another person or group of people. For this reason, accretionary empathy is more likely to be experienced as personally transformative.

This distinction is also reflected in the types of practices that are associated with eliciting the two types of empathy. Some of the practices associated with arousing transitory empathy, as discussed in the previous section, include: simulating experiences of racism through the one-time use of a hijab; imaginative exercises, such as the smart phone app which prompts users to imagine that they are on the receiving end of racial prejudice; and drawing inferences about a person's experience based on the experiences of other people in the same social group. Tellingly, these practices aim to function as a kind of shortcut to understanding the experiences of others.

The process of cultivating accretionary empathy, on the other hand, involves receptivity to another person in their particularity and complexity. Matthew Ratcliffe (2014) offers a useful description of empathy as a perception-like process where one explores another person's experience. Central to the process for Ratcliffe is an orientation of care

or concern for what the other person is going through, because if we are not attentively invested in that experience, the exploration ceases. Ratcliffe explains the process like this: “One begins with an initial, perception-like appreciation of the other’s experience” and this appreciation “becomes more refined and elaborate as the interaction [with the other person] progresses ... There is a progressive exploration of difference ... a kind of openness and attentiveness to the other person” (19). In this way, aspects of the other person’s experience gradually unfold for as long as one remains in the empathetic mode. The practice of empathizing as Ratcliffe describes it involves sustained, caring engagement with another person, which enables one to gradually understand the other person’s experience and situation on the other person’s terms. This relational approach to empathy is more compatible with the recommendations offered by Ngo, Shotwell, Ray, and Ortega. It is a mode of receptivity to others that enables one to learn about and connect with others while honoring the important difference between the identities of individuals. It acknowledges others’ epistemic authority about matters relating to their own lived experience. It is guided by a concern for the other person. And it doesn’t overgeneralize about the experiences of others on the basis of their social identity.

What Ratcliffe’s description *does not* include—but which is important to my account—is the attention to the broader historical, social, and political contexts that is often needed to have a good understanding of oneself and of others. By learning about the long history of police brutality towards black people, for example, one can have a deeper grasp of the nature of a community’s outrage about police violence. That is, one is able to see the violence in the community as part of a larger pattern. Incidental aspects of the event that might have otherwise hindered empathy, such as whether the victim was resisting arrest, are put in their proper place as peripheral to the larger injustices that have taken place. Attention to the broader historical, social, and political context also gives one the ability to reflect on one’s own position of privilege relative to others and to better identify one’s particular connection to a given structural injustice. Part of the gradual unfolding of understanding of the other person that empathy entails must also therefore include education about these broader contexts.

In this respect, my account of accretionary empathy has some overlap with Naomi Head’s (2020) concept of *testimonial empathy*. Head describes testimonial empathy as a way of attending to the suffering of others that facilitates the recognition of the social structures in which experiences of injustice occur. As opposed to a mere sentimental politics, which “beats its collective brow but enacts little change,” testimonial empathy involves the practice of situating experiences of injustice into wider networks of power, enabling real recognition of collective political responsibility (339). Head notes that, in order to generate the knowledge and motivation that facilitate real political action, testimonial empathy emphasizes “listening with humility, a recognition of asymmetric vulnerabilities, a recognition of the distance between listener and narrator, and a willingness to position and interrogate the self within these global interconnections” (340).

There are, however, some important differences between testimonial empathy and accretionary empathy. For one, testimonial empathy has pointedly political aims. Head develops the concept in order to map out the affective dynamics of political responsibility. In this sense, the concept serves a norming function: it describes what our affects look like when they successfully lead us to take responsibility for structural injustice. Accretionary empathy, meanwhile, is inclusive of, but not limited to, political context. For example, a therapist might practice accretionary empathy in their engagement with a patient over the course of numerous sessions. This empathy would be

enhanced through a deeper understanding of the patient's history and their social location. But the goal of empathizing in this case is to gain the kind of knowledge about the patient that would allow the therapist to help the patient improve their mental health. The goal would be professional, not ethical or political. This distinction is important because it allows us to identify a form of empathy that is more conducive to solidarity without preemptively defining empathy in terms of its political aims. Second, while testimonial empathy is likely to be cultivated over a significant period of time, we can imagine cases of testimonial empathy that are not. For instance, one might watch a documentary that centers victims' testimony and helps the viewer to appreciate their place in unjust social structures. But once the documentary ends, the viewer could simply go on with their day. In this case, the testimonial empathy is shallow and short-term, rather than deep and extended.

Focusing on the differences between accretionary empathy and transitory empathy leads to a deflation of the stakes of the question of whether practicing empathy is good or bad in the pursuit of racial justice. Empathy is not sufficient for solidarity. And, at any given moment, it may not be necessary. Rather than adopt a resolute pro- or anti-empathy position, we should recognize that even though empathy is not the only tool for anti-racist solidarity, even though it is not always the right tool, and even though it can be used improperly, it isn't a tool that should be discarded. In some forms, and when properly utilized, it can be a valuable tool. Some sorts of empathy, such as transitory empathy—and the practices aimed at inducing it—may not be appropriate for achieving the aim of generating intergroup solidarity. At the same time, accretionary empathy—and the practices that allow us to develop it—can be morally and politically invaluable.

Consider the following example. In the state of California, black women are six times more likely than white women to die within a year of pregnancy (Ronayne 2021). Statistics like this point to an injustice where the stakes are life-or-death. Yet the causes of this disparity are structural, and so not easy to pinpoint. As a result, while the injustice is clearly troubling, hearing about this statistic in isolation might not garner the sort of visceral emotional response that would push those who are not personally affected by the injustice to fight for the \$6.7 million dollar legislation proposed to address the problem. When it comes to racial injustices that are not immediately experienced in a visceral way by those who are not impacted by the injustices, it is clear that people's automatic empathetic responses are not sufficient indicators of the extent of a moral wrong, nor do they suffice as motivators of political solidarity.

Accretionary empathy, as one might expect, is valuable over the long term—for sustaining relationships, for deeper learning about others in their particularity and complexity, and for careful reflection about one's own responsibilities with regard to resisting structural injustices. However, it can also have significant impacts for moral judgments at any given moment. Practicing accretionary empathy in the case of black maternal mortality might involve slow processes of seeking out and listening with care to the testimony of black mothers and learning about the ways that racial bias influences relevant conditions inside and outside of hospital settings. Having engaged in those processes allows one to make more resolute judgments when occasions for action arise (for example, opportunities to educate others, to vote, to put an item on an organization's agenda, etc.).<sup>19</sup>

If it is the case that failures to empathize will perpetuate racial injustice, then working to mitigate those failures is at least part of engaging in anti-racist solidarity. Instead of rejecting empathy, we should ask what empathic practices *should* look like in light of a

recognition of the social inequality that forms the context for different groups' interactions and relationships.<sup>20</sup> The question that guides the remainder of this article, then, is how we might practice empathy while guarding against the pitfalls of centering the privileged perspective and generalized projecting.<sup>21</sup>

### Course correction: improving the practices of empathy

Lugones has written extensively about the barriers to coalition in the midst of an intersectionality of oppressions (1987, 1991, 2003, 2006). In her article "Playfulness, 'world'-traveling, and loving perception" (1987), she focuses on providing solutions to the failure of white women to love and identify with women across racial and cultural boundaries (5). Although Lugones does not use the word "empathy" in this context, her concepts of playfulness, "world"-traveling, and loving perception are fruitful for thinking about how we might practice empathy in ways that better support intergroup solidarity. Specifically, I find that the concepts serve as productive points of departure for thinking about how we can correct empathy so as to avoid the pitfalls of centering the privileged perspective and generalized projecting. These course corrections function by directing the empathizer towards accretionary, rather than transitory, empathy.

To begin, *playfulness* can be a useful idea for those who are acting in solidarity with groups that they are not a member of. For Lugones, whether an activity is playful is determined by the attitude, or disposition, that carries participants through the activity. According to her description, key features of this disposition include: "openness to surprise;" "openness to self-construction;" "not being self-important," but instead being willing to be the fool; "not worrying about competence;" and not being wedded to the rules, but rather allowing those rules to emerge through the course of the interaction (16).

I find that the idea of playfulness supports empathy since it encourages humility and vulnerability on the part of those who need to loosen their steadfast grounding in their own perspectives to allow for another person's unfamiliar experience to become central. The openness to self-construction and surprise stands in contrast to the tendency to re-center one's own frame of reference, which Shotwell criticizes. The willingness to be the fool and to not be self-important are antidotes to the epistemic arrogance that Ngo warns us of. And not being wedded to rules, but allowing them to emerge organically, expresses a willingness to share or give up power so that collaboration can be possible for the purposes of intergroup solidarity. It also allows for an interaction with individuals that is not foreclosed in advance by assumptions about the group to which the individual belongs, mitigating the stubborn overgeneralization that Ray warns us about.

Specifically, playfulness could be useful in cases in where one is receiving criticism after having been implicated in a moral wrong. For example, suppose one has misrepresented the experiences of others when speaking about them. Or perhaps one has been called out for a display of white fragility during a difficult conversation. Playfulness in this context is, crucially, not a matter of taking lightly the harm that others have experienced. Rather, it is the willingness to see oneself with good humor as a work-always-in-progress—always imperfect, always learning. As Alcott (1991) notes, errors are both unavoidable and potentially productive in political struggle. It would be "morally and politically objectionable to structure one's actions around the desire to avoid criticism" (Alcott 1991, 22).<sup>22</sup> By recognizing that when we enter into worlds that are unfamiliar to us, we are liable to trip up now and again, we can take ourselves



less seriously, focus on moral growth, moral repair, and, ultimately, turn our attention again to other people.

The second idea from Lugones that we can draw from for empathic course correction is *world-traveling*. To illustrate her notion of “world,” Lugones describes her own very disorienting experience of being identified as a very playful person by some people, and as a woman who takes “everything seriously” by others. Lugones comes to recognize that her identity is shaped by the world she is inhabiting at a given time (10). It’s not that her behavior changes; rather, the way she is perceived by others shifts in different contexts. In another example, she illustrates the difference between being constructed as “stereotypically latin” versus being constructed as “simply latin” (11). Whether one is taken to be stereotypical depends primarily on the way in which different stereotypes operate within a particular world.

Although “outsiders” to dominant culture are often forced to travel between worlds, there is moral and political promise in the intentional practice of world-traveling. As Ortega notes, “When practiced by members of dominant groups, it might also constitute an act of solidarity with struggles against oppression and injustice” (2016, 88). Lugones explains that world-traveling is a practice that allows one to identify with another person “because by travelling to their ‘world’ we can understand *what it is to be them and what it is to be ourselves in their eyes*. Only when we have travelled to each other’s ‘worlds’ are we fully subjects to each other” (17). If someone is constructed in ways that are oppressive to them in my world, I will need to travel outside of that world in order to know them beyond that construction. In order to see them as they see themselves and to see myself as they see me, I will need to travel to *their* world.

Maureen Linker (2015) offers a number of practical suggestions for how one might world-travel: by seeking out opportunities to listen to people speak about their experiences of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, relation, and dis/ability while being critical about how one’s own thoughts and attitudes might be influencing what one perceives. Linker suggests learning from blogs, novels, plays, films, books, art, and community meetings that center others’ identities (180–81). Linker’s account evokes the idea that empathy is a mode of inquiry, rather than a kind of knowledge. Empathy is actively seeking a better understanding. It is the space of between not knowing and assuming I know.

I find the idea of world-traveling to be a useful point of departure for envisioning a practice of empathy that operates as a corrective to the problems of self-centering and generalization.<sup>23</sup> At first glance, world-traveling might seem to be similar to the practice of imagining oneself in another’s shoes, the practice that Shotwell and Ngo warn us about. In both practices, one seeks a greater understanding of what another person is experiencing. There are important differences between the two practices, however. Imagining oneself in another’s shoes involves relying on the imagination in ways that continue to center one’s own epistemic frame of reference. The result is a shallow and distorted picture of the other person’s experience that one mistakes for knowledge. As opposed to the cell phone app which allowed users to “experience” racism—to claim that they’ve walked someone else’s walk for themselves and now understand what racism is like—world-traveling involves a recognition my world is not the only world, and that better understanding the other person requires travel.

The practice of world-traveling might serve as a corrective to empathy not only when one is largely ignorant about the experience of others, but also when one is closely engaged in a shared political project with others. In the case where one’s political projects interweave with others’, one risks collapsing others’ interests, experiences, and



beliefs with one's own. World-traveling requires an enduring commitment to seeing the world of the other person. As Ortega notes, world-traveling is not about going to distant lands to consume something exotic (2016, 87). The possibilities for world-traveling as a practice of solidarity "are to arise from not just one journey of world-traveling but from a nonlinear and complicated world-traveling that includes many trips—mental journeys, physical travel, and cultural negotiations" (140). This kind of travel is not mere tourism; it is the sort of engagement with the concerns of another person that leaves one transformed. Practically speaking, engaging in effective solidarity requires an actual investment of one's time and energy in a shared political project. For this reason, world-traveling is also importantly different from generalizing about the experiences of members of a given social group, which Ray and Ortega criticize. Generalization involves a failure to travel: one's perceptions remain tethered to pre-existing views about others.

The third concept that can help guide the practice of empathy is *loving perception*. Motivating Lugones' discussion of loving perception is her observation of the way white women have failed to love women of color, precluding the possibility for solidarity. Loving perception in this case is the recognition that women of color "are really subjects, lively beings, resisters, constructors of visions even though in the mainstream construction they are animated only by the arrogant perceiver and are pliable, foldable, file-awayable, classifiable" (1987, 18). To perceive with loving eyes involves the cognitive-affective work of resisting the dominant world's way of constructing those who are oppressed in order to better understand the lives of people who don't inhabit our worlds. It does not require having a full understanding of the other person's experience. Indeed, it is precisely through seeing the other person through loving eyes that one comes to understand that the other person cannot be fully grasped, but instead has an inner life that is profoundly rich, complex, and distinctive. We can build on the work of Lugones, along with that of other feminist philosophers, to show how loving perception can serve as a corrective to the error of generalized projecting, which Ray and Ortega warn us about.

Loving perception contributes moral knowledge, or knowledge of what we ought to do and how we ought to respond to and treat one another, by sensitizing us to aspects of a situation that are relevant to the interests and well-being of others. Furthermore, it can serve as a corrective to the error of generalized projecting, where one makes assumptions about another person's experiences based on generalizations about the social groups to which they belong. Margaret Olivia Little (1995, 124) explains why caring about another person—the affective aspect of loving perception—is more epistemically advantageous than taking the stance of the disinterested observer:

This stance of personal disengagement, however passionate one's desire to find out truths or to see interests advanced, carries with it tremendous epistemic danger. Most of us resist what is unique, and most of us have deep tendencies to project our own template of experiences onto others. We catalogue and classify others' experiences as soon as they are mentioned, eager for them to be confirming instances of our current favorite generality ... One of the few antidotes we have against these tendencies is listening from a stance of caring for the person herself. In such a stance, we want to hear how it is for her, in a way that welcomes novelty or uniqueness, is slow to apply templates and open to changing them, is ready to reconceptualize what the agenda itself might end up being.

Generalizing about the experiences of others is an all-too-common tendency, but it can significantly undermine intergroup solidarity. The practice of loving perception puts

this tendency in check by pulling one's focus from their own agenda—even when this agenda is to see justice done—onto the particular fears, hopes, worries, and perspectives of others. For example, a common bit of advice for anti-racist allies is that they should use their privilege to amplify underrepresented voices. However, following this advice can be harmful and insulting if done without directing loving perception to particular individuals who are impacted by one's behavior. Social justice writer Casira Copes (2021) frequently receives requests from white people to use her work, and they sometimes tell her that their intention is to amplify her message. She finds, though, that “they usually have a specific idea in mind for how they want to do that, with little to no input from me on the matter.” This is a problem, Copes explains, because “when white people come in with the goal of ‘amplifying’ me, there is an underlying assumption on their part that I want access to whatever audience or outlet they’re offering ... Making sure my work is in the right place and published under circumstances I’m most comfortable with is far more important than the number of eyes it gets in front of.” Those who believe they are contributing to social justice by using Copes’ work may actually be disregarding her interests altogether. One way to ensure that one isn’t overgeneralizing—even while attempting to be a collaborator in the fight for social justice—is by listening and looking lovingly.

## Conclusion

Does empathy support or undermine solidarity in cases of where racial injustice is systemic or complex, and where one of the parties is not directly threatened by the injustice? I’ve navigated this question by drawing attention to the multifariousness of empathy. Empathy involves affectively and epistemically orienting oneself towards another person in such a way that aspects of their situation, experience, and perspective become appreciable. There are a variety of ways to engage in this process. There are a number of faculties, qualities, dispositions, and practices that can be drawn upon to elicit empathy. I’ve argued that, when evaluating empathy, we should take these nuances into consideration. When we do, the stakes of the question about whether empathy helps or hinders intergroup solidarity are deflated. Empathy isn’t always good or always bad. Instead, some of the practices associated with eliciting empathy are sometimes inappropriate, sometimes ineffective, sometimes harmful, and sometimes applied poorly.

I have argued that accretionary empathy is better suited to support intergroup solidarity than transitory empathy. Nevertheless, even a well-constructed form of empathy carries moral and epistemic risks. This possibility does not, in my view, imply that the risks of practicing accretionary empathy outweigh the benefits. It does indicate, however, that empathy has to be supplemented with other virtues and skills. Accretionary empathy is essential for more moral, more effective practices of solidarity. But it is not enough.

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## Notes

1 This explanation of systemic injustice is adopted from Young (2005).

2 Although this paper largely addresses white people’s failures to empathize with people of color, I believe that members of all social groups could potentially occupy a privileged position with respect to some injustices and, in light of that, are subject to challenges associated with forging intergroup solidarity. For example, my analysis could apply to American-identifying US Latinxs, who may be privileged with respect to citizenship status and cultural belonging compared to some more recent, and especially undocumented, Latin American migrants. Although these groups have much in common—including ancestry and geographical origins—they are arguably *racialized* differently.

3 See Read (2019) for an overview of the variety of ways in which empathy has been characterized. Some recent edited volumes on empathy include Coplan and Goldie (2011), Decety (2012), and Maibom (2014).

4 For an overview of empirical studies supporting the connection between empathy and altruism, see Batson et al. (2009).

5 For an account of the pitfalls of compassion, see Boutland and Govier (2018, 61–76).

6 See Batson (2014), Bloom (2016), and Prinz (2011).

7 For social psychological research on the causes and effects of giving and withholding empathy in cases of intergroup conflict, see, for instance, Moses (1985); Bruneau and Saxe (2012); Nadler and Saguy (2004); and Bar-Tal and Cehajic-Clancy (2014). This research identifies psychological barriers to empathy between different groups, especially groups in competition or conflict. However, the literature takes for granted that empathy supports prosocial behavior and supports the reduction of intergroup conflict, and doesn’t attend closely to the questions of why efforts to empathize fail, or why they might be counterproductive. Although Cikara et al. (2011) note that “historical asymmetries of status and power between groups” appears to be an important variable in the effectiveness of interventions aimed at generating intergroup empathy, they also find that “well-controlled empirical studies of prejudice-reduction and conflict resolution programs remain rare, and relevant data are scarce (Paluck & Green, 2009).” This article turns to research by scholars of race in order to offer a theoretical explanation for how the specific dynamics of racism in the US might influence the ways in which empathy functions and why it might or might not contribute to intergroup solidarity.

8 Batson (2011, 11–19).

9 Aaltola (2018).

10 Fleischacker (2019).

11 Hoffman (2014) identifies five modes of empathic arousal.

12 Hoffman’s definition of empathy—“an affective response more appropriate to another’s situation than one’s own” (2014, 4)—comes close to capturing what is involved in this paradigm scenario, but it neglects to draw out the important idea that this affective response first requires perceiving the relevant features of the other person’s situation.

13 The phrase “sharing a feeling” isn’t being used to make a metaphysical claim about the nature of feelings as being the sorts of entities that are shareable in any specific way. Rather, the point is that the feeling seems to match the emotional expression of the other person and is about the other person’s situation, rather than one’s own.

14 Hoffman argues that empathy for victims of an injustice is reinforced by what he calls “empathic anger”—a retaliatory feeling that is directed towards those who wound others. Such an attitude, Hoffman argues, gives society the backbone it needs to help victims and punish perpetrators (2014, 84).

15 For more on this aspect of racialization, see Mendieta (2014).

16 Miranda Fricker (2007) theorizes that the internalization of stereotypes distorts our perceptions of others by generating affective investments that align with those stereotypes. Specifically, Fricker is concerned with the ways in which widely held prejudices can manifest as doubt about another person’s sincerity or competency. These prejudices, in turn, lead us to exclude people from the community of epistemic trust on the basis of identity prejudices.

17 A number of other scholars address the way in which practicing empathy can perpetuate social inequality. Lauren Berlant (2004, 4) articulates concerns that compassion perpetuates inequality by marking the sufferer as weak and as “over there,” and the compassionate spectator as having the resources to alleviate suffering. Feeling compassion allows the compassionate one to take pleasure in acting to alleviate the other’s suffering because it reinforces a false sense of virtuousness or innocence. Clare Hemmings (2011) echoes this concern when she claims that “empathy thus in many ways reinforces the *position* of the subject” because “the conditions of recognition of the other-subject often appear to be entirely in the subject’s hands” (203).

18 I thank an anonymous referee for pushing me to consider the role of intersectional identities in one's capacity to empathize.

19 That practices of accretionary empathy influence short-term empathetic responses is particularly significant in light of Hemming's (2011) concern that it is usually pre-existing commitments which generate our empathetic feelings, rather than empathetic feelings drawing us to expand our circle of moral concern (201, 203).

20 Here, I've focused on deficient empathy, but excessive empathy would also be a problem. Engaging in empathy may come at epistemological, emotional, cognitive, material, and embodied costs (Head 2016). For instance, those who engage in empathy in situations of conflict might find themselves subject to the loss of relationships, reputation, job security. In addition, it is by no means simple to balance our emotional attunement and resources so that we aren't overloaded by our reception to the pain and suffering of others (Tessman 2005). It is beyond the scope of the current project to address whether the various costs of experiencing empathy might outweigh the various benefits, or how such an assessment might be made. Given the variability of real-life contexts to which each of these concerns could apply, I am inclined to think that knowing when and how much empathy is called for are a matter of practical wisdom.

21 For psychological studies that support the claim that empathy is a choice, see the work of Cameron et al. (2019), Cameron and Inzlicht (2020), and Scheffer et al. (2021).

22 Shotwell (2016, 5) makes a similar point: "Often there is an implicit or explicit idea that in order to live authentically or ethically we ought to avoid potentially reprehensible results in our actions. Since it is not possible to avoid complicity, we do better to start from an assumption that everyone is implicated in situations we (at least in some way) repudiate. We are compromised and we have made compromises, and this will continue to be the way we craft the worlds to come, whatever they might turn out to be."

23 World-traveling as a practice is not without its own ethical dangers. I do not have the space to discuss the different concerns that feminists have raised about world-traveling here, though some of them overlap with the concerns about empathy that I have discussed at length. For a critical review of this literature see Linker (2015, 177–79); and Ortega (2016, 136–42). Ortega coins the phrase "critical world-traveling" to indicate the vigilance world-travelers should exercise towards both what is learned through world-traveling and the practices of traveling itself (131). Generally speaking, vigilance about the dangers of the practice is assumed in my account, given that the context of the discussion is the attempt to correct for the failures of efforts to empathize.

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