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# AESTHETICS EMPATHY AS A UNIVERSAL: A DEFINITIONAL ENQUIRY AND PILOT STUDY

by

Brian Hansen
Professor Emeritus
Department of Theatre and Dance
University of New Mexico
Albuquerque, New Mexico USA

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# Aesthetic Empathy

"I feel your pain."

Bill Clinton, 1992

## Introduction:

That some people have the capacity to "feel into" the lives of others appears -- at first glance, at any rate -- to be so obvious that when then-candidate Bill Clinton suggested in a televised forum that he was able to share the "pain" of an upset citizen, no commentator thought to challenge his assertion. In the realm of art, many writers are quite willing to assume that an aesthetic empathy exists even when there is surprisingly little empirical proof that it does. As so often happens with concepts which are "obvious," even mildly skeptical enquiry encounters surprising levels of confusion underlying a general complacency. What follows is a three-part effort: first to understand the general definitions of "empathy" as that term is used in the arts and sciences today; secondly, to speculate as to what empathy might mean in evolutionary terms, and, finally, the first report of a pilot study aimed at defining the term "aesthetic empathy" in operational terms.

## What Is Empathy?

The word "empathy" first enters the philosophical lexicon in 1897, when the term "einfühlung" (literally "one feeling" in German) was used by the German philosopher and aesthetician Theodore Lipps. In the aesthetic sense in which the Germans adopted the term, "empathy" is the capacity to "feel with" or "feel into" other humans, representations of humans (as in paintings, sculpture, and photographs), or even non-human objects and representations of objects (such as architecture or paintings of nature). From the outset, it was assumed that humans not only had the capacity to become "one" with others but that the exercise of this capacity was a major feature -- if not the sole aim -- of art. Since the introduction of the term, the proper uses and natural limits of empathy have been a central issue in aesthetics.

Soon after its introduction, the concept of empathy was eagerly embraced (some would say hijacked) by psychology and the helping professions, but with a significant shift in meaning: for some of them, empathy grew to mean little more than detecting and correctly identifying the thoughts and feelings of patients, not necessarily reproducing those thoughts and feelings in the therapist.

Whatever the fine points of the definition, the existence of a human capacity for empathy has seldom been questioned.

The use of the word "feeling" in the German and Greek roots of empathy has, from the very first usage, emphasized the importance of affect over cognition. One author refers to empathy as "emotional contagion" (Stotland, 27). However, the huge majority of commentators have allowed other aspects of mental activity to creep into their working definition. Therefore, research usually refers to feeling/thinking events which are to be shared between the target individual and the respondent. Thus, particularly in popular accounts, there is little or no distinction between "feeling with" and "thinking with" the target person or object. The definition used by Katz is typical in most respects -- except in its clarity:

> When we experience empathy, we feel as if we were experiencing someone else's feelings as our own. We see, we feel, we respond, and we understand as if we were, in fact, the other person. We stand in his shoes. We get under his skin (Katz, 3).
>
> When we take the position of the another person, our imagination projects us out of ourselves an into the other person....empathy can be physical, imaginative, or both. Even when it is 'imaginative,' it is more than 'intellectual.'...Our imaginative powers propel us into the position of the people with whom we feel identified (Katz, 4).
>
> When a person empathizes he abandons himself and relives in himself the emotions and responses of another person (Katz, 4).

As Katz implies, the extreme extension of the general concept of empathy would be a from of "possession"; the internal experience of the target person would so completely engage an interested observer that the two would essentially fuse. In the psychotherapeutic literature, where much energy is expended trying to separate the "empathic" from the "interpretative" roles of the therapist, the conversation takes just this spooky turn: the fear seems to be that the minds of the therapist and the patient will become so entangled that the therapist will lose his or her critical detachment.

> The ever present problem in empathy is the danger of projecting oneself into the world of another and then neglecting to respect the integrity and separateness of the other. Where the effective empathizer merges with his client and then detaches himself for the purpose of objective evaluation, the more anxious empathizer is so preoccupied with himself and his needs that he fails to recognize that differences still remain between him and his client, no matter how intense the similarity or identification. He is in danger of substituting himself for his client and of erasing the actual boundary between them (Katz, 169).

Part of the worry, justified or not, seems to arise over the perennial confusion between "empathy" and "sympathy." The distinction between the two often rests on the degree of affect in the mind of the observer. If he or she merely feels "sorry" for the target person, the condition is sympathy -- but need not necessarily involve empathy. The reverse might be true: one might empathize with situations in another's life, but not sympathize with them -- just as one might not "sympathize" with aspects of one's own character. ("I just hate myself when I do that.")

In general, a century of discussion in the psychological literature has served to expand the possible definitions of the concept of empathy to (and in some cases beyond) the breaking point. For example, several writers have raised the question of "valence" in empathic response. By this they mean the degree to which the respondent's response is even in the same direction as the target person's. Consider the enormity of this question: if the target person's feeling is sad, and the respondent is joyous, are we even talking about empathy in anything like the original sense? Yet, a respondent who says that he is sad and resentful of those who score better than him on tests is said by some to be experiencing "empathy." Theodore Lipps would be amazed.

Of course, all this fine-grain discrimination, the seemingly endless concern about the appropriate limits of empathy, the careful definition and redefinition of terms, mean nothing unless the capacity actually exists. One cannot read much about empathy without having the heretical thought that empathy might just be an entity like "soul," fuel for endless discussion, and the subject of numerous programs for modification and improvement --- but ultimately the resident of some other sphere. This would make empathy a matter of faith and, therefore, ineligible for consideration by a science of psychology -- whether evolutionary or of any other stripe.

## Empathy Research

There is an immense body of academic and professional chat on empathy. For example, 43 English-language books have "empathy" in the title and the expanded educational listings give nearly five-hundred articles on the subject in the past ten years. A complete review of the entire body would be far beyond the purview of this paper. But it is fair to summarize the research literature as follows: the huge majority is anecdotal, very little of it is empirical, and, of the limited number of scientific studies, the majority do not use their results to describe empathy at all. The typical study asks the respondent how important empathy is to him or her, often without actually defining the term, sometimes without letting the subject know that empathy is the attribute under consideration.

An example of an otherwise rigorous study which does not tell us much about empathy is the work of Mark Davis and his associates (Davis, 1994). The question which they sought to answer was "Is empathy heritable?" Accordingly, they contacted over 800 sets of twins, 509 monozygotic and 330 dizygotic, and administered a standard adjective check list test; the aim was for the respondents to check the adjectives which "best describe" them. Their conclusion? Identical twins are more likely that fraternal twins to check adjectives which the researchers feel show that they value empathy in three areas: "empathy concern," "personal distress," and "perspective taking." Their results show that these aspects of personality are heritable at about the rate of other personality characteristics. But what does this say about empathy? The best that can be inferred is that identical twins seem to value things that some people might call empathy. Quite responsibly, Davis et al. shade the title of the article to reflect this uncertainty: "The Heritability of Characteristics Associated with Dispositional Empathy." The literature is replete with similar near misses.

There are, however, a few pieces of research which attempt to deal directly with the existence and nature of empathy. Especially good examples are provided by the work of the research team headed by William Ickes at the University of Texas, Arlington (Marangoni et al. 1995). In a typical study of this kind, target individuals are videotaped in therapy conducted by a trained therapist. Immediately after the sessions, which range between 30 and 50 minutes in length, the targets are asked to look at their own tapes; the tapes are stopped at intervals as the targets are asked what they were thinking or feeling at that moment in the tape. These self-reports are then recorded. Later, the tape is shown to others; at the same points in the tape, it is halted and the respondents asked what the target individual is thinking/feeling. These responses are then recorded. Then, a panel of experts synchronize the two tapes and, at each juncture, judge the degree to which the two reports are the same. Under these conditions, it is possible to judge the "empathic accuracy" of the respondents. And it is this accuracy, the degree to which observers correctly predict what the person on the tape is thinking/feeling, which is judged the final measure of both the existence and degree of empathy.

Of course, there are some problems with this general approach. For example, there is no guarantee that the target subjects are accurately recalling what they were thinking/feeling as the tapes were being made. Nor are the self-reports very penetrating ("I was feeling sad as I remembered my divorce"). Another criticism is that the only items being tracked are those which can be put into words; no matter how serious the attempt to capture feelings or connotative meanings, the process is tied to descriptive language and is, therefore, nearly always relentlessly cognitive.

The most serious criticism cuts to the heart of this kind of empathy research. A skillful respondent might well identify all the ideas and emotions in the tape without experiencing any of those states themselves. High rates of success could be the result of well-honed observational and deductive skills; indeed, the most cold-hearted and distant sociopath might do very well at this kind of task.

Finally, at a practical level, the process described above is extremely time-consuming and expensive. In the Marangoni study, for example, there were three target tapes and only twenty respondents; each response took close to four hours; a team of experts had to be trained to rate the responses. Even if the conceptual issues could be dismissed or ignored, the idea of using such an approach to screen applicants for counseling programs (her suggestion), or to track students, or to learn more about certain kinds of pathologies is simply too much to contemplate.

Clearly, what is needed is a simple, inexpensive, and valid method of detecting and measuring empathy. If it exists.

Would Empathy be Adaptive?:

Empathy is one of those human capacities which ought to have evolved -- even if it didn't.

The traditional test for adaptive value is to look not backward but forward. Rather than argue that anything which currently exists must have been adaptive -- a tautology -- the recommended method is to imagine the change in its absence and ask whether an objective observer could have predicted its value in advance. By this standard, empathy seems to win a resounding vote for adaptation.

Since the pleistocene at least, our species has had a special need to know what was going on in other members of our species. Our species' great gamble, a commitment to culture over instinct, must have reached a point where it was clear that the greatest danger to any individual human's reproductive success was from other humans -- not floods, leopards, or any natural calamity. At that point, it would have made very good sense to begin to invest serious energy in understanding the behavior -- including intentions -- or other humans. From this period dates our obsessive interest in people-watching.

One could argue that there is no better way to grasp what someone else is feeling/ thinking/intending than to feel it oneself. If empathic people want to know what others are thinking/feeling they need only consider their own internal experience. (We won't consider the obvious objection: that there are counter-balancing needs to mask our feelings; it would stand to reason that, as empathy evolved, people would have also evolved a capacity for inscrutability. And today we would be studying the adaptive character of apparent dullness.)

Certainly, at least some level of empathic involvement is assumed in those theories which see the arts as an evolutionary adaptation. In the work of Ellen Dissanayake I find a compelling general argument in this regard. Among the biologists who have tried to understand the mechanics of how this might work, I return to the work of Nicholas Humphrey. In a very much more sophisticated argument than I can recount here, Humphrey says that individuals who have a rich fund of experience (plus an effective way to process it) will be at a competitive advantage over those who do not. They will bring to new challenges a fund of possible solutions, one of which has a probability of success.

Humphrey's contribution is his belief that one way in which people can build up the fund of experience to which they can turn is through fantasy. He argues that the fantasy experience of the kind encountered in novels, plays, films, and dreams becomes a form of vicarious or virtual experience, a form which provides some of the useful characteristics of real life. Indeed, this virtual experience is superior to real life in at least one respect: you don't die from the vicarious variety.

The presumed linkage in this line of argument, the element which gives special power to vicarious experience, must be empathy. The reasoning would be: the higher the degree of empathy, the closer the vicarious experience of art (or story telling, or other forms of fantasy) is to life itself; hence, the more valuable the experience will be to the spectator.

An interesting question emerges: If there is an evolved capacity for empathy, where does it reside? What portion of what we loosely call "intelligence" would make use of empathy? Evolutionary psychologists have suggested at least two models of the human mind which deal with human capacities in terms of "mental modules." Cosmides and Tooby have suggested the arresting image of the mind as a kind of Swiss army knife: not a general use tool but a collection of specialized tools, each one shaped to a particular human challenge. Dan Sperber has also sees the human mind as a collection of particularized function. (For a very clear synthesis of the two positions, one cannot do better than Steven Mithen's The Prehistory of the Mind.) What emerges is agreement that there is collection of capacities called "social intelligence." It seems logical that empathy would be a sub-capacity within that social intelligence.[1]

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[1] There is another contender. Cosmides and Tooby, Sperber, and Mithen all agree that there are several specialized intelligences, of which "social intelligence" is just one. But "natural history

But there could be a down-side to empathy, as well. Imagine a person with extremely high levels of empathy (particularly if he or she were not able to turn the capacity off at will). Certain activities would be difficult for such a person. Such a person would find it difficult to cause others pain, either physical or emotional. Imagine the career options closed to such a person: surgeon, teacher, general ....parent. And, if the capacity for empathy were extended to animals, the list would include hunter, rancher, cook, or any activity which might directly or indirectly call up empathy with a victim. We can imagine the impact of any kind of representational art on such people. Again, at first glance, the power of such art would seem to be perfect; involvement would be complete, the experience would not merely be vicarious but nearly actual. But most modern theories of art balance involvement with something called "aesthetic distance." The ideal audience member/listener/viewer is expected to remain at some distance from the experience, presumably to allow the aesthetic elements to be perceived and appreciated. Therefore, the very tension which so concerns some psychotherapists, the conflict between empathy and interpretation, becomes an issue for aesthetic experience as well. Excess empathy could jeopardize the aesthetic experience as

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intelligence" is another, and there are some aspects of empathy which seem to occur in that realm. For example, contemporary hunter gatherers regularly report that the secret to successful hunting is the capacity "think like the prey." One could argue that the skillful hunter is empathizing with his prey. A counter argument would be that the hunter is really personalizing -- or anthropomorphizing -- the prey. In short, the hunter is imagining the prey as a human and tries to anticipate its mental state accordingly.

completely as it might therapy.

The most extreme definition of empathy, the one which originated just one hundred years ago, remains of the greatest interest to artists. The idea that humans might have an innate ability to actually share thoughts and feelings with other people -- and with representations of other people -- is so intriguing that it deserves to be fully explored. And the possibility that techniques originating with the arts themselves just might provide such a path is a poetic irony worth savoring.

Predictions:

If empathy is a human universal (or near universal), evolutionary theory demands that it have selective value. But there are also other expectations which flow from that position. For example, if empathy is an evolved skill, one might expect that there is variance in its appearance; some people ought to display more of the quality than others. Indeed, there ought to be people who have high (disabling?) levels of empathy and others none at all. Furthermore, there might well be differences based on the kinds of life roles encountered in the "environment of evolutionary adaptation." One might expect that there would be gender differences. Another prediction might related to life course: empathic skills might be more important for people at some stages and or conditions in their lives. Finally, even effective empathizers might prove to be better in some situations than others.

Operationalizing Empathy:

Self-reports are always questionable in psychological testing; what is taking place in the black box of the human brain is susceptible to manipulation on its way to a report. Even if a thoroughly honest person is somehow gifted with the ability to perceive what is happening in there, the act of getting those thoughts and feeling converted into words is a daunting one. Professional writers spend lifetimes to trying to report, honestly and accurately, what they are feeling -- and yet we routinely take the blather of college sophomores as clear and convincing proof of what is going on inside the human mind. Simple self-protection suggests that researchers ought to be fairly cautious. The only reasonable answer is to record the actual behaviors of people. In the case of empathy research, we ought to find a way to elicit behaviors from people in such a way that those behaviors can be compared.

Let me suggest such a way.

Take a familiar, modern acting exercise: actors who have become familiar with a character in a play may be asked to undertake activities not in the play as if they were the character. Two fairly ordinary examples make the point quite well: the actor may be asked to create documents in character, writing an autobiography of the character or keeping a journal in the character's words; or, actors may be asked to improvise scenes which never occur in the play. Bertold Brecht once directed a production of _Hamlet_; he had his actors improvise a scene between the Sea Captain and Hamlet in which the exiled prince explains to his shipmates his vision of a post-feudal Denmark. Of course, this is all very interesting -- and may even be of some use to the actor -- but it cannot be compared to any objective measure; hence, we cannot judge the truth of such an improvisation in any scientific sense.

But what if we asked people to do the same thing, to try to respond _in character_ to situations to which the researcher actually knew the outcome? Say, for example, we asked a person to take a driver's license examination _as if they were another person_ -- and if the other person was a real person -- and we already knew that target person's performance on the test. Better yet, what if we asked a person to take a projective test _in character_. And the character in question was someone who actually existed -- and who actually had taken the test? If the test in question encompassed both the affective and cognitive spheres, we might fairly say that the difference between the test scores of the two individuals would be an operational definition of empathy. That is what I am up to.

## _The Semantic Differential_:

The semantic differential is a psychological test devised by Osgood, Tannenbaum, and Succi in the 1950's (Osgood). A thumbnail description of the semantic differential would note that subjects are asked to describe certain verbal concepts in terms of a series of polar adjectives. Each pair of adjectives is separated by a line divided into seven spaces; the subject is asked to mark the location of the concept on that line (see Appendix A). The theory underlying the semantic differential was originally that all human meaning can be described by a limited number of dimensions. These dimensions make up what Osgood called "semantic space." Any person's assigned meaning for any concept could be located by an address in that semantic space. It was also assumed that the collective meanings for particular concepts, each described by its address in semantic space, would provide significant clusters for different cultures, for men and women, for healthy and sick individuals, and so on. In one dramatic stunt, a woman with the multiple personality disorder -- the same one who would become famous in The Three Faces of Eve -- was given the semantic differential in each of her several personas. She located key concepts in semantic space very differently in each of her personas.

Today we now know that there are serious difficulties with the very idea of semantic space -- difficulties which I will not recount here. But there are advantages to the semantic differential which -- because they are not dependent on the truth or falsity of semantic space -- remain. For example, the semantic differential has the capacity to capture and objectify individual differences in meaning -- and not simply denotative meaning. This is exceedingly important for the arts where the most important level of meaning is often connotative -- poetic, emotionally charged, and broadly symbolic. In addition, the d-square measure, originally devised to describe distances between specific locations in semantic space, is still useful even if the supposed dimensionality of the space is disregarded. I have used this application of semantic distance in my previous research (Hansen 1966).

If we assume that the semantic differential is capable of describing important aspects of ones emotional and cognitive state, and the d-square statistic is an accurate measure of the difference between those states, it follows that we may have an operational definition of empathy: namely, low d-square scores (close semantic distance) will equal high empathy. At first, I was skeptical of this self-definition of empathy; however, after reviewing the competing systems, I became attracted to semantic distance as a measure of empathy.

## Method:

For a pilot study of this kind, five things were needed: target individuals, concepts, respondents, a version of the semantic differential, and a way to bring them together. Some decisions were easier than others. For example, the question of which version of the semantic differential should be used -- a question which always plagues researchers -- was resolved rather quickly; my 1966 research created a short version which seems particularly suitable for theatre concepts. Since respondents were being asked to respond to real people as if they were characters in a play, there seemed a certain face validity to using a version which had proved itself in that context. (If this approach proves promising, a more refined version of the semantic differential might be worth the effort.) The version of the semantic differential used, together with the printed instructions provided each respondent, make up Appendix B.

I began working mainly with theatre students for two reasons: they are available to me and they are especially comfortable with the language used and the nature of the task. I anticipated at the outset that I would not find theatre students significantly different from others in the larger population. (This last has been cast into doubt in some very interesting ways.)

For the target individuals, I was able to find students -- both graduate and undergraduates -- who had interesting stories and were willing to share them. These people were selected from volunteers who had heard of the study and answered my request posted on department bulletin boards. I interviewed the potential targets and discussed with them the kinds of experiences which might make good material for the study. I made every effort to underline the fact that the stories they were prepared to share were true. I then went to considerable trouble to confirm that they were genuine.

Among the targets, I searched for a balance of males and females, of specific vs. abstract concepts, of concepts which would be familiar to American undergraduates and those which would provide a real challenge. Finally, I made spontaneous, uninterrupted, unedited videotapes of the targets telling their stories. The targets were asked to simply look into the camera and try to give a viewer the clearest look into their lives, especially their thoughts and feelings. Each of the resulting tapes, five in all, proved to be roughly 20 minutes in length.

Considering my initial fears, the tapes turned out to be much better than I had hoped. The topics ranged from easily understood and practical interactions with the world (a young man proudly demonstrating his motorscooter) to cognitive stretches (a man who is convinced that the earth is hollow and inhabited, a fact which has been kept from the majority of us by a conspiracy of silence), to the highly charged (a woman describing having a child out of wedlock, giving it up for adoption, and being reunited some 18 years later).

Selecting the specific concepts for each tape was something of a dilemma. Usually there were many suitable for each one, since each target brought to the situation a typically human range of feelings. For example, a professional clown, talking about her respect for clowning as she puts on her makeup, is rich with feelings and thoughts. She is proud of her character, but concerned that she hasn't done a particularly good job of applying her makeup this day; she takes the role of clown very seriously, of course, but is openly delighted as she speaks of the joy which the laughter of others gives her. One could argue that the mix is too rich, and not nearly clear enough for a scientific study. But, if empathy is truly a human capacity, it must work in messy human interactions -- not exclusively in the pristine laboratory. So a number of concepts were chosen for each tape:

Target Individuals and Concepts

| Name | Description | Concept(s) |
|---|---|---|
| Billy | Young man describes and demonstrates his motorscooter; he is very enthusiastic and charming. | Billy's motorscooter |
| Karen | She puts on her makeup, wig, and costume. As she does, she talks about how important clowning has become for her. She speaks of her education, including her time at Clown College. | Karen's clown character |
| Rosalie | When she was 18, Rosalie had a child out of wedlock. She gave the child up for adoption. After 18 years, she tracked down and re-established contact with her daughter, Carol. | The Need to Own Ones Past<br>(Finding Carol)<br>(That Home for Unwed Mothers) |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Louisa | Louisa is in her late 30's. She speaks of her strained relationship with her father. She ends by describing a violent quarrel in which finally faces him down -- and her new relationship with him afterward. | Her Father as He Was<br>Her Father as He Is |
| Norlen | Norlen is roughly 50 years years of age and the father of six (?). He is utterly convinced of the theory of the Hollow Earth, that our planet is actually hollow, that there are large openings at the north and south poles, that there is a sun inside, and that the lost tribes of Israel live in the interior. | Individuality<br>The Hollow Earth |

My hope was that this range of targets and concepts was sufficient to provide an empathic opportunity for any of the respondents, beginning with undergraduate students in acting classes in the University of New Mexico's Department of Theatre and Dance.

Actually, the first persons to take the semantic differential were the target individuals. Immediately upon completing their tapes, they completed the semantic differential on the concept(s) which had been selected. Then, the process was repeated at least twice more: after the passage of some time -- usually seven days -- the target individual would watch the tape they had made and take the semantic differential again. Thus, all targets had taken the semantic differential three times and their slightly divergent responses could be averaged for each scale. It was these averaged responses which made up the target version of the semantic differential against which all others were measured by way of the general distance equation, d-square.

The respondents watched the tapes in groups ranging in size from one to 12. Once they had experienced the tapes and taken the semantic differential, their scores were compared (scale by scale) with the target scores, the differences squared, and those squares summed to provide an empathy score. Since the higher the d-square the greater the semantic distance, low scores are assumed to represent higher levels of empathy than high ones.

## Results:

The attached data, shown in table form, should be replaced by a much larger data set once we meet in Washington. As it stands, the best that can be said is that -- by and large -- the number of respondents is simply too small to be useful.

SEMANTIC DISTANCE FOR TARGET CONCEPTS: $D^2$ SCORES

| | ID# | BILLY | KAREN | ROSALIE | LOUISA (Her father as he was) | LOUISA (her father as he is) | NORLAN (indivduality) | NORLAN (the hollow earth) | $\bar{X}$ |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. | 5285 | 15.61 | 27.95 | 39.50 | | | | | 27.69 |
| 2. | 8301 | 22.34 | 38.51 | 42.82 | | | | | 34.57 |
| 3. | 4914 | 56.18 | 29.65 | 56.06 | | | | | 47.30 |
| 4. | 2215 | 71.38 | 44.68 | 50.26 | | | | | 55.44 |
| 5. | 8264 | 33.77 | 53.72 | | | | | | 43.74 |
| 6. | 2986 | 42.97 | 23.74 | 47.46 | | | | | 38.06 |
| 7. | 4604 | 18.98 | 23.85 | 54.46 | 83.77 | 32.27 | 48.33 | 38.14 | 42.83 |
| 8. | 8621 | 35.64 | 40.94 | 52.90 | 79.53 | 09.94 | 28.93 | 24.74 | 38.95 |
| 9. | 2189 | 42.56 | 42.54 | 55.26 | | | | | 46.78 |
| 10. | 3329 | 30.78 | 36.31 | 37.66 | | | | | 34.92 |
| 11. | 6939 | 23.98 | 63.34 | 37.86 | 41.57 | 52.14 | 31.73 | 186.53 | 62.45 |
| 12. | 7105 | | 31.34 | 23.66 | | | | | 27.50 |
| 13. | 8930 | | | | 94.57 | 08.34 | 18.56 | 28.75 | 37.55 |
| 14. | 3104 | | 16.94 | 60.60 | | | | | 38.77 |
| 15. | 2728 | | | | 34.17 | 19.94 | 17.93 | 26.94 | 24.75 |
| | $\bar{X}$ | 35.84 | 33.18 | 46.54 | 66.72 | 24.53 | 29.10 | 26.64 | |

Some observations may be useful. A random response to this version of the semantic yields a score of roughly 108. Thus, it is clear that many students are able to score much better than chance. One who does not is subject 6939, whose score of 186.53 raises some interesting questions. I happened to ask him about his response to Norlen's idea of a "hollow earth": he confessed that he became so cross with the Norlen that -- contrary to the directions --he responded as himself, not Norlen.

At the other end of the spectrum, the two scores less than 10 suggest very high levels of -- well, something. It is certainly not just luck. In general, nearly anyone can score in the 50's and 60's; scores in the 30's and 40's are good; scores in the 20's are very good; scores in the teens are amazingly perceptive.

## Discussion:

During this work, I have been increasingly reminded of a discovery made by Stotland and his associates in regard to the relationship of what they call empathy and fantasy. They had given a palmer sweat response test to people who thought they were seeing another person (a shill, really) experiencing an electric shock. They also gave the respondents a lengthy self-report inventory as to their behaviors. Their hope was to find the self-report items which highly correlated with the highest response to the palmer sweat response. They found high correlations with only three items:

> When I am, reading an interesting story or novel, I imagine how I would feel if the events in the story were happening to me.
>
> After acting in a play myself, or seeing a play or movie, I have felt partly as though I were one of the characters.
>
> When I watch a good movie, I can very easily put myself in the place of a leading character (Stotland, 144).

On the basis of responses to three scales, the researchers began to feel that three three scales, renamed the Fantasy-Empathy (F-E) scale just might be most robust measure of empathy.

> The results of the validation studies on the fantasy-empathy scale suggest that the dimension of fantasy or the ability to transplant oneself by imagination into another setting is an important contingency for the process of empathy (Stotland, 42).

A less professional reader than myself might respond "Well, duh!" Stotland's F-E scale items are very close paraphrases of statements on the 34-item "Absorption" inventory which is widely used in this country. This test tries to uncover the ease with which respondents move into fantasy situations in their ordinary life; indeed, it is felt to be a measure of fantasy as well absorption. Because it is a standardized test, the Absorption inventory purports to have high degrees of validity and reliability.

For some time now, I have been giving the Absorption test to students in the actor training program at UNM. Not surprisingly, these acting students have much higher fantasy scores on the absorption inventory than does the general population. But this raises an intriguing question: what is the relationship between fantasy and empathy? To what degree could they simply be the same thing -- or might both rely upon a deeper capacity, say imagination. To be truly heretical, what would happen if we simply discarded the concept of empathy, at least as laid out by Lipps? What would change?

At the behavioral level, very little. People would still be able to become involved with the lives of others, but the direction of involvement would be changed. Instead of "reaching out to others" and "getting into their skins," the information would simply be processed internally, based on information provided. Take the following example from the entry "empathy" from the Oxford Companion to the Mind: "Thus a golfer may feel he is almost soaring into the air with the ball when he hits a good drive" (220). The traditional definition of empathy would have the golfer reaching out to the ball, fusing with it, and experiencing its flight accordingly. Nothing important changes if the golfer simply thinks "What if I were that golf ball flying through the air -- and hitting the ground -- and rolling toward the pin?"

Accordingly, what would happen if the students in this study were not told "...to put yourself totally into that person's place" but to "imagine what you would feel and think if you were in that person's place." In short, what kind of result would I have if the students were simply asked to treat the tapes as data and imagine how they would respond in the same situation?

This small change may seem insignificant, but it has profound implications in a number of areas, including actor training. At a philosophical level, for example, it avoids a form of reification: behaving as if persons in plays or movies, or novels have a "character" out there somewhere with whom the actor is expected to fuse. Or suggesting that Greek temples and golf balls have human attributes. At a psychological level, we might avoid another error, the expectation that fellow humans have simple, straight-forward character which responds in simple ways to complex stimuli.

In the case of Rosalie, I found that her volatile nature prevented her from responding to the same stimulus in the same way in multiple administrations of the semantic differential. As important, her responses tended to be so idiosyncratic as to throw off the huge majority of respondents. I am not in the least impugning her serious participation in the study when I point out that the scores of serious, attentive, and sensitive students to her concept of "That Home for Unwed Mothers" are so high as to be worse than chance. It is fair to say that the semantic distance between individual respondents to that concept are much closer to one another than they are to the woman who actually experienced the event and has the baseline score. If the goal of empathy is to walk in the shoes of another, Rosalie presents the respondent with the closet of Imelda Marcos.

A final point: there is some virtue to simplification in a field as complicated and subjective as the arts. If we were forced to see all experience of the arts as nothing more (or less!) than providing information for a personal, mental arena called "the imagination," an arena in which we were each invited to fantasize about ourselves in the presented situation, the value to the social intelligence, would be no less valuable -- just clearer. And the case for imagination and fantasy as selected attributes of our species is much easier to make.

## Conclusion

There is some reason to doubt the very existence of aesthetic empathy, especially as laid out a century ago by Lipps. Just as important, the "cult of empathy" with its delicious dangers and temptations is nothing more than a psychiatric version of spiritual possession. There is little danger that an observer will become entangled with another or become infected with "emotional contagion" because that is not the way the process works. The image of a person "reaching out" toward another, of "getting inside the skin of someone else," of "living vicariously the lives of another" is misleading. The direction of the flow is wrong. In fact, the person with a strong capacity for fantasy takes the sometimes lean facts of a fictional or real experience and treats them as a suggestion: "Imagine yourself in this situation." The resulting fantasy takes place within the observer, probably in that portion of the mind reserved for the social intelligence. What the skillful artist does is to provide useful material for that process; indeed, the task of, say, the theatre artist is to present tempting material to a mental capacity already hungry for it ... in the same way that the digestive system becomes "hungry" for nutritional food. Seen from this perspective, the goal of the artist is as straightforward as it is difficult: provide sufficient clues to shape and inform the fantasy which necessarily takes place inside the observer. The artist does not provide emotion -- he or she provides information and allows those who are able to fill in the fantasy from their own experience. Therefore, the best instruction may be simply, "imagine yourself in this situation."

And, there seems to be a very clear test for this capacity: it is called the "Affiliation Test." It takes less than five minutes to administer, can be printed on two sides of a single sheet of paper, and can be graded by anyone. What a concept!

## Appendix A
## EMPATHY STUDY

Three minutes of your time will help us understand "empathy," the capacity of people to feel "into" others. You will be given some information about a person; then you will be asked to put yourself totally into that person's place. Finally, you will be asked to respond to an idea, a person, or an image as if you were that target person.

At the top of the other side of this page, you will find the name of a person and a concept, as in the following example:

_____Larry________
(target person)

_____Larry's dog, Mort________
(concept)

Below them, you will find a number of scales with adjectives written at each end, like this:

Playful ___:___:___:___:___:___:___ Serious

Now consider both the target person and the concept shown in the example.

We would like you to show an instinctive response --_as Larry_ -- by marking each of the scales. Please put an X in the space on the scale which best indicates Larry's feelings about his dog, Mort.

For example, if he would find Mort "very serious," you would mark the scale like this:

Playful ___:___:___:___:___:___:_X_ Serious

If Larry finds Mort finds "moderately playful," you would mark the scale:

Playful ___:_X_:___:___:___:___:___ Serious

"Slightly serious" would be shown as:

Playful ___:___:___:___:_X_:___:___ Serious

A mark in the center space means that Larry cannot decide between the two adjectives or that the scale is totally inappropriate. But, because this is a projective test, don't decide too quickly that a scale is silly or inappropriate.

PLEASE MARK EVERY SCALE AND MARK ONLY IN THE SPACES, NOT ON THE VERTICAL LINES.

______________________________
(target person)

______________________________
(concept)

Worthless ___:___:___:___:___:___:___ Valuable

Tense ___:___:___:___:___:___:___ Relaxed

Calm ___:___:___:___:___:___:___ Excitable

Light ___:___:___:___:___:___:___ Heavy

Deep ___:___:___:___:___:___:___ Shallow

Immoral ___:___:___:___:___:___:___ Moral

Cool ___:___:___:___:___:___:___ Warm

Honest ___:___:___:___:___:___:___ Dishonest

Serious ___:___:___:___:___:___:___ Humorous

Cold ___:___:___:___:___:___:___ Hot

Heavy ___:___:___:___:___:___:___ Light

Ugly ___:___:___:___:___:___:___ Beautiful

We thank you for your assistance.

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