BEYOND EMPATHY: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC APPROACH TO CROSS-CULTURAL SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

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Intense challenges confront the profession of social work at the beginning of the new century. Time-honored practice theories and concepts are being vigorously challenged by a growing critique of the Eurocentric, hegemonic assumptions embedded in traditionally established practice. The vast social and cultural diversity that forms the current context of practice has challenged the "myth of sameness" (Kadushin, 1990) underlying the historic social work tradition @ a tradition rooted in the universalist assumption that practice theories are broadly applicable to all persons because "deep down we are all the same"(Pinderhuges, 1989:24). Calls for diversity-inclusive theorizing and research have been met by unprecedented scholarly efforts directed towards conceptualizing "cultural competence" and formulating practice guidelines for working with diverse populations (e.g. Cross, Bazron, Dennis, & Isaacs, 1989; Devore & Schlesinger, 1996; Green, 1995; LaFromboise & Foster, 1992; McGoldrick Giordano, & Pearce, 1996; Pinderhuges, 1989; Sue & Sue, 1990; Sue, Ivey, & Pedersen, 1996).

A common theme in almost all conceptualizations of culturally competent practice is the need for practitioners to gain a deep and profound understanding of the "worldview" or "cultural frame of reference" of the client. Yet to be fully articulated, however, is a clear conceptual framework and attendant practice principles to guide the *process* of negotiating this kind of understanding in social work encounters. Awaiting renewed attention is what McGoldrick (1996) calls that most basic of social work questions: "How can we understand those who are different from ourselves?"

In the traditional practice literature, *empathy* has long been offered as a primary means of facilitating interpersonal understanding across difference @ a way of stepping into another's world and attempting to see and experience things from the other's point of view. Although empathy is identified in most classic and contemporary social work practice texts as a *sine qua non* of the helping relationship (e.g. Biesteck, 1957; Compton & Gallaway, 1994; Fisher, 1978; Goldstein, 1973; Hepworth & Larson, 1993; Kadushin, 1972, 1990; Perlman, 1979; Strode & Strode, 1942; Towle, 1935), the idea that practitioners can put themselves into the shoes of the other is increasingly seen as presumptuous. Devore and Schlesinger (1996), for example, question the degree to which practitioners can empathically identify with clients whose life experiences may be "vastly different" than their own (p.25). Ibrahim (1991) questions whether traditional means of establishing and conveying empathy are appropriate with all cultural groups. The focus in traditional empathy theory on "feelings" rather than "cultural meanings" has been critiqued (Green, 1995), as has the inattention to the cultural and sociopolitical context of human experience (Keefe, 1980; Pinderhuges, 1979).

Further challenges to the concept of empathy have been raised on epistemological grounds. Intense insider/outsider debates (Holland, Pike & Harris, 1990), and the postmodern emphasis on the *otherness* of people's experience of themselves and the world have often left practitioners with paralyzing doubts as to whether it is at all possible to empathically understand the culturally dissimilar "Other" (Gellner, 1992).

Paradoxically, while empathy faces serious challenges on conceptual grounds, renewed emphasis on the clinical importance of empathy has been sparked by mounting empirical evidence that "relationship" factors are more predictive of successful clinical outcome than treatment method or technique (Duncan & Moynihan, 1994; Hubble, Duncan, & Miller, 1998; Lambert, Shapiro, & Bergin, 1986; Patterson, 1984). The burgeoning helping alliance literature also underscores the importance of empathy as a central component in the formation of the alliance (Beres & Arlow, 1974; Bordin, 1979; Horvath & Greenberg, 1986; Meissner, 1996; Patton & Meara, 1992).

Ironically, despite empathy's widely-accepted clinical significance, there has been surprisingly little research or theoretical development in this area in recent years, and few efforts have been directed towards reexamining empathy in the context of diversity. Fundamental questions lying at the heart of the social work profession await renewed theoretical and research attention, including:

Is empathy still a useful concept for understanding the other's frame of reference?

Are there other conceptual tools that can enlarge our understanding of how to create shared spaces for mutual understanding in cross-cultural dialogue?

How can empathy be reconceptualized in ways that more fully attend to the multiple, intersecting diversities of participants in social work encounters?

These questions form the focus of this paper.

GUIDING FRAMEWORK

In addressing the framing questions, this paper begins with a critical review of empathy theory, with particular attention directed to the gaps and limitations that exist from a multicultural practice perspective. It is argued that traditional conceptualizations of empathy, rooted in a clinical/scientific paradigm, fail to adequately address the cultural and contextual dimensions of human experience.

Next, the multicultural practice literature will be critically examined, underscoring the recurrent emphasis on the *need* to understand culture as a frame of reference, while critiquing the frequently-offered approaches to *acquiring* this kind of understanding in the actual conduct of practice.

In an effort to address these gaps and limitations, this paper then argues that a shift to an interpretive/ethnographic perspective opens an enlarged space for reexamining empathy in the context of diversity. With its focus on accessing "lived experience," an interpretive/ethnographic perspective offers a different "way of knowing" that is inductive, reflexive, dialogical, meaning-focused and contextualized (Geertz, 1973, 1983; Spradley, 1979).

While the potentially productive interface between ethnography and social work has been noted by other authors (Fortune, 1994; Goldstein, 1994; Green, 1995; Leigh, 1998; Sells, Smith, & Newfield, 1997), this paper takes the discussion a step further by examining how ethnographic epistemology and methodology can broaden our understanding of empathy by providing a pathway for exploring the complex world of lived experience from the point of view of those who live it. It is argued that an ethnographic perspective is uniquely suited to multicultural practice because of its abiding concern for the emic

point of view, for understanding situated meanings, for acknowledging multiple voices and realities, for grasping the other's frame of reference, for *verstehen.*

Throughout the paper, the term *culture* @ with a small "c" @ is used in a broad sense to include ethnographic variables (e.g. ethnicity, nationality, language, religion), demographic variables (e.g. age, sex, place of residence), status variables (e.g. social, educational, economic), and affiliations (formal, informal) (Pedersen, 1997). The terms *practitioners* and *clients* , although often carrying hierarchical connotations, are intended in this paper to simply identify the partner(s) in a social work dialogue.

TRADITIONAL CONCEPTUALIZATIONS OF EMPATHY

A broad consensus exists across disciplinary and theoretical perspectives that empathy is a fundamental feature of the helping process (Coady, 1987). It is widely considered to be one of the most basic skills required of the helping professional. Therapeutic alliance theorists place empathy "at the heart of the therapeutic relation and specifically of the therapeutic alliance" (Meissner, 1996:150). Within social work, empathy has been, and continues to be, identified as a foundational practice principle (e.g. Biesteck, 1957; Compton & Gallaway, 1994; Fisher, 1978; Goldstein, 1973; Hepworth & Larson, 1993; Kadushin, 1972, 1990; Perlman, 1979; Sheafor, Horejsi, & Horejsi, 1994; Strode & Strode, 1942; Towle, 1935; Turner, 1999). What is noteworthy, however, is that current social work practice texts continue to rely on conceptualizations of empathy dating back several decades, primarily to Rogers (1957, 1966,1975), Truax and Carkhuff (1967), and Perlman (1957, 1979). There has been little theoretical development or research on empathy in recent years.

A variety of definitions and metaphors have been offered in the empathy literature over the decades, including: taking the role of the other (Mead, 1934); listening with the third ear (Reik, 1948); vicarious introspection (Kohut, 1959); emotional knowing (Greenson, 1960); entering imaginatively into the inner life of another (Kadushin, 1972); sensing and relating to the feelings underlying another's words and actions (Perlman, 1979); attempting to see and experience things from another's perspective (Beck, Rush, Shaw & Emery, 1979); entering into the feelings and experiences of another (Compton & Gallaway, 1999); and taking on the perspective of another (Sheafor, Horejsi, & Horejsi, 1994).

Carl Rogers (1957, 1966, 1975), arguably the most influential empathy theorist, defined empathy as "the perceiving of the internal frame of reference of another with accuracy…as if one were the other person but without ever losing the 'as if' condition (Rogers, 1966: 409). Rogers is perhaps best known for his famous and controversial assertion that empathy, warmth and genuineness are the necessary and sufficient "core conditions" for therapeutic change. For Rogers, empathic understanding was a particular type of deep, nonjudgmental understanding, distinct from that which comes from external frames.

While differing conceptualizations exist, three main "components" of empathy are routinely cited: cognitive, affective, and communicative (Duan and Hill, 1996). The question as to which component best captures the nature of empathy has become the source of a "central, recurrent, and seemingly intractable debate" (Davis, 1994). A common strategy aimed at reconciling the affective-cognitive-communicative components of empathy has been to frame empathy as a series of stages or phases (e.g.

Barrett-Lennard, 1981; Goldstein & Michaels, 1985; Ivey, Ivey & Simek-Morgan 1987; Keefe, 1976, 1979; Macarov, 1978). Phase conceptualizations of empathy have been applied to many models of empathy skills training in which empathy is framed as a series of steps, stages, and degrees (e.g. Carkhuff & Pierce, 1975; Egan 1998; Hepworth & Larson, 1993).

Common Themes In the Empathy Literature

Despite the wide variety of conceptualizations that exist in the expansive empathy literature, several common theoretical themes can be discerned.

From the beginning, empathy has been seen as a means of "knowing" another, of understanding some aspect of another person's phenomenological experience

The clinical usefulness of empathy has become axiomatic in the helping professions

empathy is typically conceptualized as a practitioner "skill"

"accurate" empathy requires the control of the practitioner's subjectivity

empathy consists of affective, cognitive and communicative components

empathy can be operationalized in behavioural terms, typically verbal responses such as paraphrasing and reflecting feelings

the primary functions of empathy are to facilitate the alliance and elicit information, although some claim a curative function as well.

Limitations of Traditional Conceptualizations of Empathy

Several notable gaps and contestable assumptions severely constrain the continuing usefulness of traditional conceptualizations of empathy in the context of diversity.

Inattention to cultural meanings. Embedded in the empathy literature is the implicit assumption that empathy is a transcultural phenomenon which draws on "kindred feelings" (Paul, 1967) shared by all human beings. Conspicuously absent is any discussion of the influence of cultural differences on empathic processes. Green (1995) challenges the universalist assumptions embedded in empathy theory, arguing that empathy as a technique in cross-cultural encounters is "inadequate" because it presumes an ability to enter into the sensibilities of another without first learning the context from which those sensibilities arise. He asserts that empathy needs to be "recast" from tuning in to feelings, to rigorous attention to the cultural meanings that clients and practitioners attach to behaviour, events, persons, and especially words.

Inattention to sociopolitical context. The emphasis in the literature on tuning in to the client's self-experience has not been accompanied by a corresponding emphasis on tuning in to the sociopolitical context of power and oppression that shapes the perspective and life experience of both clients and practitioners. Largely missing is a recognition that the helping relationship itself takes place in the context of racism, classism, sexism, heterosexism, ageism, ableism, and so on. The social location, and the associated power distribution of participants in the social work encounter has received scant attention in the empathy literature.

The positioning of the practitioner as expert knower. Influenced by its roots in a medical model, traditional conceptualizations of empathy typically position practitioners as "expert knowers" who supposedly understand their clients' lives better than the clients themselves. There is a preoccupation in the literature with "accurate" perception of the other's frame of reference (Perlman, 1979; Rogers, 1957), with little acknowledgment that the essential *otherness* of a human being can never be fully grasped. These assumptions have been strenuously critiqued by cross-cultural writers who stress the

importance of approaching the client as "knower" (Tyler, Sussewell, & Williams-McCoy, 1985: 311).

Uni-directional empathy. Most conceptualizations of empathy frame it as a "practitioner-offered" condition (Rogers 1957, 1975), ignoring the client's contribution to the process. Barrett-Lennard (1962, 1981, 1993) and Jordan (1991) are among the few who draw attention to the need for the *mutual* empathic involvement of both client and practitioner in negotiating understanding. The neglect of a dialogical dimension in traditional conceptualizations of empathy is a particular conceptual weakness.

Reductionist assumptions. A striking feature of the empathy literature is the focus on defining and operationalizing empathy into a "scientific" construct that lends itself to empirical observation, quantitative investigation, and skills-training techniques. Most of the theorizing and research on empathy is based on implicit empiricist assumptions that this complex, multidimensional phenomenon can be reduced to discreet, quantifiable elements. The practitioner's "subjectivity" is seen as an impediment that must be, and can be, controlled in order to gain objective, "accurate" understanding. The enormous effort directed to isolating, quantifying, measuring and sequentially ordering the components of empathy is in keeping with the reductionist demands of traditional scientific methods, but inconsistent with the interpretive ethnographic perspective advocated in this paper.

MULTICULTURAL PRACTICE THEORY

Multicultural practice theory not only offers a compelling critique of traditionally established practice but adds a broadened theoretical orientation that gives full recognition to the importance of cultural dynamics embedded in helping processes. The multicultural perspective emerges from a conception of culture as a "frame of reference" from which we encounter the world, ourselves, and life" (Pedersen, 1985: 6).

A variety of conceptualizations of "culturally competent" practice have been formulated in recent years in response to the failure of traditional practice theories to address multicultural diversities (e.g.Cross, Bazron, Dennis, & Isaacs, 1989; Green, 1995; La Fromboise & Foster, 1992; Sue & Sue, 1990; Sue et al., 1992). Almost all of these models emphasize the need for practitioners to gain a profound understanding of the "worldview" or "cultural frame of reference" of the client. The most commonly-offered approach to acquiring this kind of understanding has been what Dyche and Zayas (1995) call the *cultural literacy* approach. In this model, practitioners are encouraged to deepen their understanding of the client's life world by studying the history, backgrounds, and characteristic traits of diverse cultural groups (e.g. LaFromboise & Foster, 1991; Sue & Zane, 1987). Many practice textbooks follow this approach, presenting a wealth of culture-specific information and culture-specific practice recommendations organized under broad ethnic group categories, most commonly the four major American-designated ethnic groups of African Americans, Asian Americans, Native Americans, and Hispanic Americans (e.g. Devore & Schlensinger, 1991; Green, 1995; McGoldrick, Giordano, & Pearce, 1996; Sue & Sue, 1990; Sue, Zane & Young, 1994).

Although the cultural literacy approach has served to draw attention to the centrality of culture in human experience, the model has several theoretical, conceptual, and practical weaknesses that limit its usefulness as a way of gaining an understanding of worldviews and cultural meanings.

First, the use of a group-membership conceptualization of culture risks gross overgeneralizations while ignoring the extraordinary heterogeneity that exists within groups. It fails to recognize that people who share the same group membership often exhibit considerable cultural variation on a number of variables such as country of origin, generational status, socioeconomic status, education, preferred language, immigration history, in addition to the intersecting diversities of gender, age, sexual orientation, differential abilities, religious affiliation, and so on. Oftentimes normative, nomothetic information is difficult to distinguish from stereotypes, and may inadvertently elicit prejudice in the very attempt to avoid it (Dyche & Zayas, 1995).

Group-membership conceptualizations of culture are also problematic in that they divert attention from what Ho (1995) maintains is the more salient variable of "internalized culture," that is, the cultural elements internalized by persons from a variety of cultural systems. According to Ho, it is the client's internalized culture, not his or her cultural group membership, to which practitioners must attend.

This model also places the practitioner in the powerful position of "expert knower" who needs to master information about other cultures in order to understand and work with people who are culturally "different" (Spreight, Myers, Cox, & Highlen, 1991). In these formulations, ethnicity tends to be framed as a client variable, rather than a characteristic of both practitioner and client..

A practical limitation is the impossibility of learning the cultural backgrounds of all the groups encountered in culturally diverse contexts (Dyche & Zayas, 1995).

While the need for alternatives to the cultural literacy model have been widely noted (Dyche & Zayas, 1995; Green, 1995; Ho, 1995; Saleeby, 1994), proponents of more phenomenologically or ethnographically oriented approaches have yet to offer a unifying conceptual framework, or to specifically address the issue of empathy in the context of diversity.

In order to address this gap, this paper argues that by crossing traditional disciplinary boundaries, we can find within the field of ethnography a largely untapped source of compatible concepts and highly developed processes for eliciting and apprehending the cultural and contextual meanings that shape human experience. Ethnography offers both an alternative epistemology and a methodology for negotiating mutual understanding in cross-cultural encounters.

THE ETHNOGRAPHIC PERSPECTIVE

No longer relegated to the study of cultures in far-off places, ethnography has "overflowed the banks of anthropology" and is increasingly recognized by a growing number of disciplines as offering a unique approach to understanding the meanings and intentions that shape the nature of human and social conduct (Spradley, 1979:1). With its roots in symbolic interactionism and sociolinguistics, the essential core of ethnography is a concern with *meaning*, and one of the primary means for the investigation of meaning is ethnographic interviewing (Spradley, 1979).

Though not always recognized, ethnography and social work espouse a surprisingly similar goal: to understand the human experience as it is lived, felt, and known by its participants (Goldstein, 1994). The usefulness of ethnographic methods to cross-cultural practice in the human services has been a primary theme in the work of Green (1995) and his associate Leigh (1998). Their primary emphasis, however, has been on the way that

practitioners can use informants, cultural guides, translators, indigenous healers, and field observations to "build a knowledge base" about a particular ethnic group @ an emphasis akin to the cultural literacy approach. Green (1995), for example, discusses how practitioners can gather cultural information from a number of clients until "a general picture of life in a given community" emerges (p. 143). Similarly, Leigh (1998) suggests that the "accumulated data" from a number of interviews with clients can be used to "develop an agency profile of minority persons of color" or to construct "a classification of client conditions and possible treatments from a cultural perspective" (p.114).

The present paper diverges significantly from the work of these authors by suggesting that ethnographic concepts and principles can help illuminate empathic processes for understanding the individual client's *unique* frame of reference, rather than a cultural group's frame of reference.

Clifford Geertz's (1973, 1983) interpretive ethnography is particularly illuminating in terms of the current discussion. Geertz is widely credited for revolutionizing ethnography by advocating an interpretive analysis of culture "in search of meaning" rather than a scientific analysis "in search of laws" (Geertz, 1973: 24). Geertz challenged the historic epistemological base of ethnography with its Cartesian assumptions of 'value free' inquiry and claims to 'objective' truth. Instead, he advocated for an emic or *verstehen* approach to understanding local knowledge and pluralist standpoints (Geertz, 1983). For Geertz , the "whole point" of ethnographic inquiry is "to aid us in gaining access to the conceptual world in which our subjects live so that we can, in some extended sense of the term, converse with them" (Geertz, 1973:24). To commit oneself to an interpretive approach to the study of culture, he said, was to commit oneself to a view of ethnographic assertions as "essentially contestable" (Geertz, 1973:29). The practitioner can no longer presume to be able to present "an objective, noncontested account of the other's experience" (Denzin, 1997: xiii).

This paper argues that the Geertz's ethnographic concepts of contextual meaning, local knowledge, pluralist standpoints, emic inquiry, contestable accounts, and interpretive understandings point the way to a broadened conceptualization of empathy in the context of diversity. In addition, Spradley's (1979) application of these concepts in his useful volume, *The Ethnographic Interview,* provides a rich source of tools and processes for negotiating mutual understanding in cross-cultural dialogue. In particular, the following principles and processes are particularly salient.

Adopting the stance of learner. A critical feature of interpretive ethnography is the positioning of the professional, not as expert knower, but as learner. Ethnographers are trained to ask, "What do my informants know that I can discover?," as opposed to, "What expert knowledge do I posses which will help me explain this?" (Spradley, 1979). The ethnographic emphasis on the learner stance is strikingly similar to "not-knowing" stance of narrative therapists (Anderson & Goolishian, 1992) and the stance of naiveté and curiosity advocated by some multicultural scholars (Dyche & Zayas, 1995). Ethnographers say, in effect, "I am interested in finding out how you see things, how your talk about things. I want to understand things from your point of view" (Spradley, 1979).

By valuing and legitimating the knowledge and expertise of the other, the learner's stance encourages the expressions of multiple ideas and subjugated knowledges. Although some may argue that asking clients to "teach" practitioners about their cultural perspective is a

form of exploitation, this paper agrees with Scott and Borodovsky (1990) that eliciting idiographic cultural content *directly* from clients, rather than from nomothetic accounts in secondary sources, is an ethical responsibility of the culturally competent practitioner.

Listening for meaning. Although both ethnographers and practitioners place high value on attentive listening, ethnographic listening shifts the focus from listening for the "feelings" that underlie the client's words and actions (e.g. Perlman, 1979), in favour of listening for underlying cultural "meanings" (Green, 1995). While multicultural practice theorists also emphasize the importance attending to cultural meanings, what ethnography adds to the discussion is its particular focus on "language" as a pathway to the discovery of meaning. According to Spradley (1979), "language is more than a means of communicating about reality: it is a tool for constructing reality" (p.17). Language is not simply a tool for transmitting information; it establishes the meanings speakers assign to their experiences. In this regard, a key ethnographic concept is the "use principle" (Spradley, 1979), that is, rather than directly asking respondents, "What do you mean?," ethnographers attempt to discover *tacit* meanings by attending to the way that phrases and terms are used in ordinary language. Ethnographers are trained to be alert for "translation competence," that is, the tendency of people to "translate" their experience into a form which will be better understood by outsiders (such as practitioners). The tendency to translate for outsiders is seen as distorting the cultural reality of the respondent (Spradley, 1979). Ethnographers instead attempt to elicit "untranslated" speech and meaning by repeatedly encouraging interviewees to tell their stories "in their own words" (Sells, Smith, & Newfield, 1997). Ethnographers use strategies such as *re-stating* and *incorporating* key phrases and terms used by the respondent as a way of prioritizing the respondents' voice over the professional's voice. These techniques stand in contrast to the traditional empathic techniques of *rephrasing* and *reframing* .The risk inherent in rephrasing, according to Green (1995), is that professional language can override and distort client meanings.

Acknowledging power and sociopolitical context. The adoption of a learner's stance, and the prioritizing of the client's voice, are both expressions of the ethnographic focus on reducing power differentials between inquirer and respondent. Ethnographers acknowledge that the interview itself takes place in a sociopolitical context of unequal power distributions based on race, class, gender and other socially constructed categories (Seidman, 1991). In ethnographic research, respondents are often invited to participate as collaborators and co-researchers in the exploration of a given phenomenon (Merchant & Dupuy, 1996). Ethnography's acute attention to eliciting and documenting silenced and subjugated voices reflects its epistemological emphasis on a collaborative approach to understanding in which no one's perspectives are privileged (Denzin, 1997).

Ethnography's sensitivity to issues of dominance and power contrasts with the insufficient attention given to these issues in traditional empathy theory. Keefe (1979, 1980) is one of the few empathy theorists who emphasized the need for empathic attunement not only to "psychodynamics" but also to "dynamics of power and oppression." Multicultural theorists, along with interpretive ethnographers, have been far more attentive than traditional empathy theorists to the ways in which experiences of entitlement and powerlessness shape perceptions, feelings, and behaviour. By incorporating multicultural and ethnographic perspectives into a discussion of empathy,

the process of negotiating understanding broadens to include attunement to the sociopolitical context and power arrangements that shape human experience.

Negotiating understanding dialogically. In traditional conceptualizations of empathy, as well as in cultural literacy models, an understanding of the other's frame of reference depends largely on the clinical and cultural expertise of practitioners. In contrast, a key theoretical and practice concept in interpretive ethnography is that professionals initially abstain from interpretations based on preexisting frameworks. Theoretical preconceptions are held in abeyance in order to hear the client's story openly, without attempting to "make sense" of the story on the basis of practitioner assumptions.

Emerging understandings are framed as tentative hypotheses which are supported, disconfirmed, or modified by respondents themselves in a reciprocal, iterative exchange. Only at the end of the process do ethnographers look at how inductively-derived understandings fit with relevant theoretical materials (Sells et al., 1997). The meaning of the experience is "named" through a collaborative, negotiated process.

Although multicultural writers also emphasize collaborative processes, an important contribution of ethnography is the use of the "conversation" metaphor to underscore the mutual, dialogical nature of ethnographic knowing. Lambek (1993) concurs with Geertz (1973) that the goal of ethnographic inquiry is to create "a mutually comprehensible dialogue," and "a ground for further conversation" (p.27). In ethnography, "incommensurable discourses" are seen not as problematic but rather as "opening up a space" in which people can converse about the discordant elements of their experience (Lambek, 1993). The gap or clash between various kinds meanings is what ultimately provides an ideal space for mutual learning. Conceptualizations of empathy can benefit from this concept that the "conversation" does not depend on shared meanings, only on shared *exploration* of meanings..

Engaging in Self-reflexivity. Although self-awareness of preconceived assumptions, values and biases is axiomatic in both traditional and multicultural theories of practice, ethnography moves beyond the rather passive notion of "self-awareness" and stresses the more active concept of "reflexivity." Vigilant and ongoing reflexivity is considered foundational to a recognition of the ways in which the autobiographies, cultures, and historical contexts of inquirers determine what they see and do not see (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1989). Reflexivity also differs in purpose from self-awareness. Multicultural scholars stress the need for practitioners to be "aware" of their biases and assumptions and to "ferret out" and eliminate private agendas, personal prejudices, and stereotypic perceptions of clients (Ridley, et al.,1994). In ethnographic inquiry however, the control or elimination of bias is not assumed possible, nor even desirable. Subjectivity is not controlled but i*ncorporated* into the inquiry by making biases explicit and acknowledging how biases dictate questions and category construction (Sells et.al., 1997).

Ethnographers practice reflexivity through the writing of reflexive journals, field, notes, and memos (Sells et al., 1997; Wax, 1971). These writings contain the introspective record of ideas, fears, mistakes, confusion, breakthroughs and problems that arise in the course of inquiry. This emphasis on reflexivity is yet another conceptual contribution from ethnography to an enlarged conceptualization of empathic processes.

In sum, the ethnographic perspective offers several key concepts and processes that can be used as building blocks in an enlarged conceptual framework for understanding empathy in the context of diversity. Simply said, ethnography enables us to *know* in a

more profound way (Fortune, 1994). The talent is not solely technical. It is conceptual and epistemological.

A PROPOSED CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The foregoing interdisciplinary analysis points to the need for a shift in the focus of empathy from the client's "self-experience" to the "lived experience", from the "internal" frame of reference to the "cultural" frame of reference. It is proposed that empathy be reconceptualized as a process of caring inquiry into the lived experience of the other, and a process of dialogically creating shared understanding of the cultural and contextual meanings that shape that experience. In short, empathy is both a mode of inquiry and a mode of bonding @ a way of knowing, and a way of connection.

The distinguishing features of a reconceptualization of empathy are summarized below.

Traditional Empathy	Reconceptualized Empathy
client's reality seen as knowable	understanding seen as partial and fallible
attunement to underlying feelings	attunement to language and meaning
person-centered	context-centered (cultural/sociopolitical)
social locations ignored	social locations examined
expert stance	learner stance
practitioner understandings privileged	client understandings privileged
unidirectional (practitioner-offered)	mutual and reciprocal
deductively-derived understanding	inductive, dialogical understanding
requires self-awareness	requires self-reflexivity

Implications for Further Research

The proposed conceptual framework lays the ground for further research into the ways in which human beings come to know and understand one another in cross-cultural clinical practice. The framework proposed above is seen as provisional in that it is derived from an analysis and synthesis of theoretical literature. The next step is to engage in discovery-oriented research that probes the degree to which this theoretically-based conceptualization of empathic processes "fits" with the lived experience of participants in cross-cultural clinical encounters. It is argued that future empathy research needs to be grounded in the lived experience of practitioners and clients in naturalistic settings, much as Rogers and Kohut formulated their ground-breaking theories from actual practice experience.

In the same way that an interpretive ethnographic perspective was adopted in conceptualizing empathy, this paper argues for a corresponding adoption of interpretive inquiry methodologies that are consistent with these epistemological assumptions. Interpretive methodologies (including phenomenological, grounded theory, narrative, and qualitative methodologies) would shift the primary focus of research from the identification of components of empathy to the "lived experience" of empathy and the processes by which participants in clinical encounters negotiate mutual understanding. Rather than viewing empathy as primarily a therapist behaviour, the focus shifts to the patterns of inquiry, dialogue, and reflection that promote or limit the coconstruction of understanding between dialogue partners. Processes and patterns that are thought to be

facilitative of empathic understanding could be systematically examined to see if they are associated with good engagement and other identified outcomes.

Renewed research directed to illuminating the phenomenological nature and function of empathy is particularly important and timely in the current era of managed care in which the healing potential of relationships is being minimized over manualized approaches to practice. In the increasingly diverse and globalized context of social work practice, the capacity to empathize with other persons and perspectives @ to negotiate mutual understanding and meaning @ may well become one of the most important aspects of culturally competent practice.

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