

## The Significance of “Empathy” in Social Sciences

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**Abstract:** *Connecting to others, knowing others, and collaborating with others for making society better driven by an endless empathy for others constitute the core of social life and the essence of social science knowledge. This paper explores the significance of empathy in conceptualizing everyday life in three ways: (1) as a method to fieldwork, (2) as a method to sociological knowledge, and (3) as a method to organize and live everyday life. The central argument of the paper is that a detached approach, bereft of empathy, to sociology and life is not only impracticable but also undesirable.*

**Keywords:** Empathy, interaction, fieldwork, cognition, knowledge formation, social praxis, intersubjectivity.

### ***Introduction***

The word “empathy” is not to be confused with the word “sympathy”, as is often done in its everyday usage. Empathy can be looked into as way of life involving the modes of cognition, self-formation, interaction and transformation, that we usually do in the lifeworld. These processes work in feedback in a circular way. The empathetic mode of life calls for going beyond one’s own version of reality in order to understand other peoples’ reality, their sensations, joy and pain, and thus form a reconciled and negotiated cognition of the lifeworld. It involves an open-end unprejudiced communication, interaction, in order to get to the emotional state of others, and, at the same time, share one’s own emotional world, the world of feelings, with honesty. The two-way mutual understanding with empathy helps build a shared cognitive world, which, in turn, impacts the mode of social interaction. Curiosity about others is the first step towards understanding of and care for the fellow human beings.

Everyday life is all about how we conceive, organize and act in a constructed lifeworld, both individually and collectively. The significance of "empathy" in understanding and organizing everyday life stands underexplored in current sociological research, particularly in India, although some of the early social thinkers had thought about it with great interest. We have not explored enough the cues left behind by Rousseau, Husserl, Schutz or C. Wright Mills to look at social relations and everyday life through empathy, notwithstanding the fact that in the West a branch of sociology named *sociology of empathy* is already doing rounds. Rousseau in shaping the idea of "pity" had said that there is empathy at the root of all social relations. Husserl and Schutz have identified empathy as a force through which experience-based subjective knowledge could be transformed into intersubjective or shared knowledge. For C. Wright Mills, empathy is the virtue with which a sociologist can connect to history, contemporary social issues and even with the future of mankind.

My paper would therefore explore the significance of empathy in conceptualizing everyday life in three ways: (1) as a method to fieldwork, (2) as a method to sociological knowledge, and (3) as a method to organize and live everyday life. The central argument of the paper is that a detached approach to sociology and life is not only impracticable but also undesirable.

### ***Empathy as a method to fieldwork***

Right from our undergraduate days we have been taught that sociology is an objective social science, an idea that has been endorsed by Andre Beteille and many other sociologists and anthropologists in India (Beteille 2002) and that we have to detach ourselves (in emotive and value terms) from the subjects of our study (Weber 1949). But, when we approach our field of research and start interacting with the subjects of our study we tend to take it as a form of social interaction, in which both parties (the researcher and the subjects) approach with all the humane qualities like emotions, passions, pains and sufferings, will to care for the fellow human beings. Both the researcher and the information givers remain normal human beings throughout the interaction sessions, where they display all the general rules of any other form social interaction. Besides the above-mentioned considerations, they also bring in self-interest and even trickery in the course of playing a mind-game. Inquisitiveness and probing coated in empathy constitute a part of ethnomethodology. Here is an illustration. Suppose I am riding a rickshaw and I immediately feel connected with the poverty stricken *rickshawwalasee* his toil, sufferings and I start asking about

his name, his family, the conditions of the trade with the rickshaw owner, place of origin, the living conditions and so on. In this interaction the *rickshawwala* is unequally placed (in class terms, culture and power) and therefore he is expected to check his inquisitiveness. Rarely, such passing interactions will turn into a one-to-one permanent relation; but, the rider and the rickshaw-puller will go back with a social understanding, which works in defining the long-term relationship between the members of the two distinct social categories. Similar terms define the relationship between the middleclass urbanites and their maids: the only difference here is that the maid spends a longer time in the house of the employer and interacts in greater depth. If the maid is inquisitive and bears some observation power, in most cases she has both the qualities, she can draw a fair (and objective) understanding of the employer and the work situation. Both situations are unjust and exploitative yet an empathic approach adds humane dimensions to the relationship. Interestingly, a humane approach gives stability to the relationship which works to the advantage of the employer, because, she can deploy it as a strategy of personnel management in order to sustain the exploitative relationship. For the maid or the rickshaw-puller, who, despite being conscious about the mechanism of exploitation, takes empathy as a bonus to her/his livelihood.

Interaction between the researcher and the information giver is different from the above two forms. The researcher plans and works out strategies in selecting the information givers and convincing them to open up and give authentic information. The strategies would vary depending upon the fields, and the population that constitutes the field. The fieldworker has a time frame as she wants to collect “adequate” information for the project within a targeted time. The information giver is the “giver” and the researcher the “taker” and this interaction is expected to bind the researcher with gratitude and obligation. If it is an urban middleclass elderly population the researcher cannot resort to trickery as the informants are educated, informed and experienced and they do not expect anything from the researcher; they only wish her well in life. The informants could either be indifferent or by kind and empathetic to the young researcher. But convincing them to sit in the discussion table is a big challenge.

I have studied the elderly citizens in Kolkata in 2013-14 for my PhD work on the *Life of the Middleclass Aged in Kolkata* (Roy 2019). I selected a total of about 120 families/respondents, taking 60 from a neighbourhood (block) of Salt Lake area of Kolkata, and 60 from two old-age home/homes, from the southern part of the metropolitan Kolkata. I knew well that until and unless I build up a strong rapport with my respondents, they

would not feel comfortable in sharing their life experiences with me. In order to make a breakthrough I first made an appointment with a willing respondent and went to his/her place at a time they had given. My first task was to explain the respondent in details everything about my study to remove all the possible apprehensions from their mind. I deliberately spoke a bit about me and my family, I shared my own experience with my grandparents, my love for them and how badly I miss them now when they have crossed over. The idea was to give a fair understanding of my social location and my intensions and interests. This helped generate in the respondent a bit of empathy for me. I never took fieldwork as a “heartless exercise; because of similarities in class and cultural I could identify myself with the elderly informants and had an instant emotive attachment as well; I could see my own grandma and grandpa in them. I knew that moving into interview in a formal way (like question answer way) would not help and therefore I took the questions in my memory without any fixed sequence and took care in keeping the conversation as natural as possible, without giving them a hint that I was already into the interview. The interview was thus transformed into a normal interaction or “adda”, based on high degree of mutual trust and a bit of mutual empathy.

Besides sharing some personal information and likings as a strategy of rapport building another factor that came to my help was my training in music, Rabindrasangeet, an unequivocal identification mark of urban middleclass culture of the Bengalis all over I didn’t miss an opportunity to use this cultural capital of mine in order to impress upon my informants. I could notice a sea change in their approach towards me after I had sung a couple of songs. It helped establish a “spiritual connection”; they probably took me as a girl next door, who can be trusted. May be, unconsciously, they saw their daughters or grand-daughters in me. Many of the respondents had some training and interest in music and they also sang the songs of their liking, finding an appreciative and knowledgeable audience in me. Having a middleclass upbringing we could connect with each other as we shared similar cultural symbols (for details see Roy 2014).

I have learnt, in course of interaction with the respondents, that being aged they live with a general feeling of neglect or loneliness and they long for warmth and are willing to share the experiences of their life with someone whom they can trust and who can generate a bit of empathy. They generally have enough of leisure time and less amount of work. Moreover, as their children are all well settled, and scattered to different places, they remain busy with their own work and thus the aged people feel bored and they seek people with whom he/she can chat for a while. Thus, in most cases,

my respondents felt very happy to see me, once they got over with the initial phase of hesitation and were interested to talk about their life; their achievements, struggles and regrets, their thoughts about the contemporary society, about the younger generation and so on. In talking about their childhood days, and about their parents, the respondents often got very nostalgic and they shared very interesting incidents of their life with me. They shared the minute details of their life. They just went on with a flow and shared many things which were not even required for my study. But they were in such a good mood that I didn't feel like stopping them; stopping them would have been rude and unethical on my part. I did notice the glow in their face and engagement when they were unfolding the layers of untold "truths" of their life.

One thing that I really cherish about my field work is that during this process of interview I managed to build up a very strong bond with some of my respondents, the relations are like that between close relations based on mutual care, love and respect. I met some retired scientists, university professors and retired administrators and some of them actually guided me in my fieldwork and advised me how should I approach the informants and what kind of questions I should be asking. After the interview got over many of my respondents invited for lunch or dinner. Some of them asked me to visit them whenever I had time and sing some songs for them. In one of the old-age homes the elderly ladies invited me to join their evening prayers and sing prayer songs with them. The most wonderful thing is that even after returning to my native place (Siliguri) I was in regular touch over telephone with some respondents with whom I had developed intimacy. They called me asking about my health, my music and insist that I should visit them again. I visited them as a researcher, a stranger, yet brief spells of interactions have helped establish long-term bonds. I was the taker and the respondents were the givers and the exchanges were never reciprocal yet they showered unconditional love and "pity" on me.

In early September 2015 I joined a college in Kolkata as an Assistant Professor. I visited the old-age homes and some of the close informants in Salt Lake, carrying sweets. They were so pleased to see me after a gap and were immensely happy at my getting the job. I spent some time with them and they blessed me for my happy future. Now, I live in Salt Lake and try to keep in touch with the informants with whom I have developed some affinity.

From my year-long fieldwork experiences I have learnt that when the two sides trust each other they relate to each other well and often transcend the rules of a formal meeting to travel into each other's private spheres.

They share their problems, pains and joys, achievements and regrets of life to each other with an unconscious will to relate to each other with a hope for moral support.

In this interaction, the researcher is the one who is the taker and therefore the primary beneficiary of the interaction. But she cannot approach the interaction in the line of “calculative rationalism” (in Weberian sense); rather she travels into the private space searching for “grandparents” in the elderly, and tend to play a “daughter” or a “grand-daughter” to the elderly, who have their children or grand-children living in distant places. The subjects in the field too try (mostly unconsciously) to connect to the researcher (in varying degrees, depending on the degree of mutual liking), and share their emotions, sufferings, and joys. I understand that without this emotive and empathetic connect the fieldwork remains dry and formal and the data, thus collected, remain superficial. The fundamental question here is, can two sensitive persons remain unconcerned about each other’s problems or likings. Probably not. The other relevant question could be whether the outcome of such research would be “objective”. I think, yes. Because, without the emotive and empathetic connect with the subjects, the fieldworker is most likely to return with the superficial numerical information and the outcome of such research would be without heart and soul.

### ***Empathy as a method to knowledge***

In knowledge production, for which the human mind is naturally and culturally programmed, we always look for “totality” of knowledge, which, according to Kant, is a combination of unity and plurality. For Kant, totality is one of the “ancestral concepts of pure understanding” (Kant 1998: 215) that we bring to the world, making it the object of a “possible experience” and thereby “humanising” it. The experiences of everyday life, in reality, are transformed into stable elements of collective (or intersubjective) knowledge through social participation, exchange of information and cognition, dialogues and negotiations in the social field. In experimental terms, the senses and ways in which we apprehend the world as a totality are fluid since they are the objects of endless negotiations and reconstruction. In our subjective understanding, the world and objects appear as fragments and in incoherence, but we make efforts to make them coherent and total. We make efforts to make our cognitive world coherent and total and our work, to this end, is never complete. We travel from “concrete” fragments to aesthetic total and in this “never to be complete” task we collaborate and negotiate with the cognitive worlds of the accumulated given and the

contemporary worlds of creation with a preparedness for sacrifice of subjective self and empathy with alternative selves and differential modes of cognition. This is a condition upon which we are able to see ourselves as an integral part of the natural and social world. The totality that we collectively create is perpetually under reconstruction.

Emile Durkheim (in *Rules of Sociological Methods* [1885] (1982) conceived only of objective and socially constructed knowledge. Max Weber, while arguing that sociological knowledge must be objective, worked out strategies for construction of objective knowledge out of subjectively constructed ideal-type *verstehen* (Weber 1949). Empathy is also there in the core of Marxism; Marx had set out to explore true knowledge for the emancipation of the exploited and the oppressed. For Marx, collective experience is the true source of knowledge and knowledge thus gained in applied to the transformation of the history (Marx, 'Theses on Feuerbach', 1969).

C. Wright Mills was deeply concerned with the responsibilities of social scientists. He advocated for engagement of intellectuals in public life in contrast to merely conducting distant observations. He called upon the intellectuals and social scientists to be the "conscience keepers" of society and to be engaged in "politics of truth" for their "job is the maintenance of an adequate definition of reality". Mills stated:

the main tenet of this politics is to find out as much of the truth as he can, and to tell it to the right people, at the right time, and in the right way. Or, stated negatively: to deny publicly what he knows to be false, whenever it appears in the assertions of no matter whom; and whether it be a direct lie or a lie by omission, whether it be by virtue of official secret or an honest error. The intellectual ought to be the moral conscience of his society at least with reference to the value of truth, for in the defining instance, that is his politics. And he ought also to be a man absorbed in the attempt to know what is real and unreal (Mills 1967: 611).

In phenomenology, both Husserl and Schutz have dealt with the problem of transcendence of experience-based subjective knowledge into collectively shared intersubjective knowledge. The individuals draw knowledge out of their own experiences in the socio-spatial world (or "lifeworld", to use Husserl's terminology), yet as they interact with fellow human beings, they enter into dialogue with them and share experiences and knowledge in order to gain universal knowledge. Knowledge is thus a social construct of

the intersubjective experiences; it occurs in the course of our conscious attribution of intentional acts to other subjects, in the course of which we put ourselves into the others' shoes. In this, we tend to bracket our "subjective" beliefs and knowledge and look in the beliefs and knowledge of others and test and justify our understanding of the spatio-temporal world. We thus transcend our initial beliefs and move towards further beliefs (shared by others). It is these further beliefs that make up the rational structure underlying our intersubjective experiences. Since it takes phenomenological investigation to lay bare these beliefs, they must be first and foremost unconscious when we experience the world in the "natural attitude" (Husserl 1913).

For Husserl, the ego-centric perspective of one individual about the spatio-temporal order is just one of the many perspectives, which becomes meaningful when many such perspectives about an object coalesce at the intersubjective level. Empathy or willingness to share understanding with others is the key to "objective" understanding. Empathy also forms the basis of both our practical, aesthetical and moral evaluations and of what might be called intercultural understanding, i.e., the constitution of a "foreign world" against the background of one's own "homeworld", i.e., one's own familiar (but, again, generally unreflected) cultural heritage (cf. *Husserliana*, Vol. XV). The spatio-temporal world of each individual is unique and dynamic and the perceptions about it also changes. One has to recognize that the spatio-temporal objects forming his own world exist independently of his subjective perspective and experiences. The perceptual objects are "transcendent" and therefore there is a need to reflect back again and again to get to the proper representation in language, which is shared at the intersubjective level.

Endorsing the value of empathy in social science inquiry Claude Levi-Strauss has, in all his works, assimilated himself with the supposedly neutral and objectives of study (Johnson 2003: 186-7). He has unequivocally upheld the value of empathy in drawing ethnographic knowledge. The most convincing illustration of the claim could be his *Save Mind* (1962), where he has defenced the primitive mode of knowledge formation as scientific and aesthetic, hence not inferior to the so called modern and scientific modes. Levi-Strauss borrowed the idea from Jean-Jacques Rousseau, whom he regarded as the father of modern anthropology. Pity or empathy, for Rousseau, entails a "desire for identification with others" and a "total refusal of identification with [oneself]". The ethnographer can use himself "as his own instrument of observation". He can "learn to know himself objectively and at a distance as if he were another person." To do so, he

must identify with “his” essential humanity – what Rousseau called the humble third-person “he” within himself. Only this “other” person within him can empathise with (or pity) the concomitant others within those the anthropologist observes. In this self-mediated and intersubjective context, ethnographic identification, subsequent communication, and eventual objectification are possible. Levi-Strauss argues that “the principle of ‘confessions’, written or unacknowledged, is ... basic to the work of every anthropologist”. In this sense, Rousseau’s celebrated formula “the me is another” heralds both the emergence of “unconditional objectivity” and the resolution of the epistemological schism between self and other, outside observer and native participant (1962: 11-12).

Social interaction (field-work is one of the many forms) is always a complex process of dialogue and knowledge formation, an endless exchange of information between the ego and the alter, a dynamic feed-back between practical consciousness (existing body of knowledge) and the social situation or individuals with reference to whom actions are done. Knowledge formation, social action, and communication of information are entangled in reflexivity and continuous negotiations between actors from all sides. Since knowledge and understanding about life and social reality are drawn under the influence of tradition, the dominant discourses, and inflicted with interest the search for objective knowledge and “pure reason” ends in vain.

I have interacted with the respondents in person informally for long hours and sometimes on more than one occasion. The idea was to get into a lively “dialogue”, into sessions of intense interactions between two thinking selves who not only exchange passive accounts of their lives and viewpoints but interact with strategies of “impression management”, compassion and interest, which is not possible except in direct interaction.

I have recorded the life histories of my respondents following the logic of phenomenology (combining elements of both descriptive and hermeneutic phenomenology), which precisely means I had to get to the subjects’ accounts of their life and experiences and take care in presenting their versions undistorted in preparing the “text”, and, at the same time, being aware that the informants’ versions of the information could very well be “strategic”, “interest driven” or “unconsciously mediated”, constructed under the influence and in the language of tradition. In the process of sharing our life world with each other there is an element of empathy. We listened to each other with pity and believed each other’s stories. This empathetic interaction helps building up a trust and a great bonding with one another.

The kind of knowledge I have gathered about the life of the elderly is the result of negotiations and empathetic exchange of views at different level – the media-based views, the knowledge in existing literature, the knowledge I gathered out of my own interactions with the elderly in my family and close circuit and the narratives of the information givers in the field. Interaction with the informants in the field works and impacts both ways. My respondents' narrations about their life world and the relationship with their children have left a deep impact on the way I perceive my own life and the life of the elderly at large.

### ***Empathy in everyday life***

Rousseau further emphasized that one of the secrets of human life is empathy or "pity", a unique quality by which we relate to others facilitating man's transition from nature to culture. Pity is defined as man's capacity to identify with his fellow human beings and with all living creatures (Levi-Strauss 1962: 77). Drawing from Rousseau, Levi-Strauss argues that humility of self and identification with others have ethical and moral implications. If psychologically "I am not 'me', but the weakest and humblest of 'others'," then sociologically my own culture is always partial; that is, "it is in no way a privileged form of society but only one of countless 'others' ..." (1962: 13). Since such an unequivocal affirmation of cultural relativism is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for an anthropological theory of social values, Levi-Strauss further echoes Rousseau's demand for the ethnological discovery of an "unshakable basis of human society" (1955: 389). Cultural anthropology is specifically charged with the scientific delineation of a "new humanist revolution" (1953: 350) with the spread of this humanism to all mankind (1960: 52) and with its concrete implementation (1961: 13). The main objective of the humanist revolution is to establish a new order where man looks at nature and fellow human beings with empathy and care and not to exploit them in the name of advancement of civilization. Levi-Strauss argues that we have to learn a lot from the so-called primitive people in re-establishing the lost connect.

We can operationalise the fundamental principles of empathy in organizing everyday life in three ways. First, we begin with a sense of humility, or a perception that we all are limited in terms of ability, morality and knowledge and therefore are always ready to listen to others before taking a relatively stable position in terms of discourses. Second, the care for nature, the animal world, and fellow human beings would prevent us from taking a "selfish" path to life. Third, in order to re-establish the otherwise lost connect

between man and nature and between fellow human beings we need to take a collective approach to life.

In section one of this paper I have discussed how “pity” or “empathy” connected me to the elderly residents in both Salt Lake residential area and in two old-age homes. I have also spelt out how some the relations have turned into permanent relations. The knowledge I have gathered out of my research, the discourses I have drawn about the elderly have been internalized and become a part of my lifeworld, my “self”. These discourses will now impact my life and my approach to the elderly, until I revise them through further praxis. Empathy thus, constitutes an integral part of our “self-care” (Foucault 1984) and our discourses. The discourses, thus formed, impact our everyday life social interaction (See, Hall 2004: 345-349). In our everyday life, we select the significant others based on our likings and interest and thus make out social world. The selection of individuals and groups of our interest is essentially dynamic since our tastes, interests or priorities change over time. Once selected, reciprocal “empathy” keeps the members of the social world connected. The dynamism of the lifeworld works through a process of placing the members in terms of proximity and distancing.

In our everyday life we make efforts to construct a lifeworld of our liking by eliminating the rough edges in it. This is a matter of collective endeavours that operate in the social field through interaction and social participation. Empathy connects an individual to her inner and outer worlds, to the family members, the relatives, friends and fellow social beings in the neighbourhoods, work place and in other collective organizations. Without empathy or pity or emotive attachment with fellow individuals and their problems social life and collective moves for social transformation is simply not possible. We cannot produce social science knowledge without an empathetic involvement with the topic of our research and with the people and their causes.

### ***Conclusion***

There is a strong intellectual tradition in social sciences, set by scholars like Rousseau, Marx, Levi-Strauss, Mills, to name only a few, that stresses upon the significance of empathy or pity as one of the fundamental principles of human life. Under the pressure of building “formal” and “objective” knowledge social sciences in recent times has undermined this tradition. In this paper, I have only argued for the “rediscovery” of empathy in social

sciences by way of understanding its immense significance in fieldwork, in knowledge production and in social praxis. Following the Marxist and humanist traditions in social sciences I have argued that the connect between modes of data collection, knowledge formation and social praxis is indisputable and universal. In this tradition, the modes of cognition, text formation and actions are conceived to inseparable as has been construed in Foucault's interpretation of "discourse". It is therefore the time that we free ourselves from the myth and demands of unembedded "objective knowledge" in order to realise the full potential of empathy as a method to knowledge and to organizing everyday life.

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