

THE PROMISE OF EMPATHY
October 16-18, 2003
The University of Iowa

Conference Description:

Empathy has recently emerged as a topic of critical importance: in the social sciences and in popular political discourse we wonder about the promise of empathy in our efforts to overcome differences of race, religion, or national culture; in the humanities and fine arts we hope to facilitate empathy by providing an imaginative reconstruction of our own or someone else's experience; in the natural sciences of evolutionary biology and neurophysiology we are eager to ground empathy in human nature.

Our cross-disciplinary conference poses the following question: when these disparate and sometimes conflicting discourses all seem to be working on the same problem at the same time, how should we understand the larger cultural project? Like the cross-disciplinary interest in race around the turn of the 20th-century or sexuality from the 1960s to the present, empathy as a focal point for inquiry says something substantial about disciplinary formation per se and about our culture writ large—something that cannot be addressed adequately when one remains strictly within disciplinary boundaries. What, for instance, is the cultural project that motivates and integrates the research on empathy currently practiced by a brain scientist such as Antonio Damasio or a primatologist such as Frans de Waal? What is the relationship between this cultural project and the one practiced by someone like Cherrie Moraga, a Chicana/lesbian playwright and author of *This Bridge Called My Back*, who cares most about the strategic possibilities of empathy for radical women of color?

We will begin our conference by contextualizing this surge in interest in empathy and its promise, providing background to the questions, “Why empathy?” “Why now?” How, for instance, does the emergence of related phenomena such as classical pity or sympathy in the European 18th-century relate to current practices of empathy? Clearly a historical treatment of the topic invites healthy skepticism about the promise of empathy. Considering, for instance, how sympathy could be used as a weapon of class warfare and exclusion in the bourgeois culture of 18th-century Europe and America, we should ask in reference to contemporary empathy, “Whose empathy?” and “Empathy for whom?” Who, for example, gains or loses with the “compassionate conservatism” recently in fashion at the level of political slogan? Historical work, however, need not be simply about the abuse of power—it would be hard to argue, for instance, that the abolitionist movement of 18th-century Europe and America was not assisted by contemporary discussions of sympathy and compassion.

With these historical and critical contexts in mind, we will look at empathy in contemporary scholarship and practice, from recent theories of empathy’s biological foundations and the impact of these theories on human psychology and theory of mind, to current practices in education, medicine, conflict resolution, politics, the media and the arts. We will explore how recent empathy scholarship and practice affect our understanding of culture—from the nature-nurture debate to our sense of cultural identity—while also asking how various approaches to empathy are in turn affected by the conditions of contemporary life. Is it meaningful, for instance, that the current interest in empathy coincides with projects of “globalization” and a digital revolution in which our daily communications are becoming increasingly mediated by machines and binary systems?

Our goal in engaging these questions in a cross-disciplinary setting is to apply the skills of the historian, the cultural critic, the artist, the educator, the scientist and the citizen to figure out how empathy can be mobilized most responsibly. What promise does empathy hold for living together today? And in what ways must this promise find its formulation beyond disciplinary boundaries?

Format of the Conference and Featured Speakers:

We will make use of a variety of presentation formats throughout the conference, including individual (featured) speakers, panel discussions, short readings and arts performances, and roundtable discussions. All events are designed to reach a wide interdisciplinary audience of scholars and lay people, communication and interaction between scholars and the general public being a primary goal of this conference.

The conference will open with an evening presentation by poet/playwright/activist **Cherrie Moraga**, who will present her notion of “bridge work” that seeks to foster empathy and engagement among disenfranchised and oppressed populations across different, and sometimes “competing,” lines of race, gender, sexuality, and ethnicity, and how artistic production (especially theater and poetry) provide a space for such bridgework to occur. This will be followed by a staged reading of a short work by Moraga given by local actors and theater students.

The following day, an initial panel, *A Critical History of Empathy*, will serve to contextualize empathy as a cultural project, which is to say, on one hand, as an implicitly valued research end in a variety of disciplines from political science to neurophysiology, and, on the other, as a subject of social and political discussion that plays an essential role in how people conduct their lives on a daily basis, and how they define themselves in relation to others, to government, and to society as a whole.

Other panels include:

- ***Cognition, Emotion and the Science of Empathy***
- ***The Arts as Space for Empathic Experience***
- ***Witnessing, Testifying, Peacemaking***
- ***Empathy and Methodology: History, Anthropology, and Beyond***
- ***The Bounds of Empathy: Race, Culture, Class***
- ***Exploring the Meanings of Love and Empathy in Parenting and Teaching***
- ***Empathy, Media, and Technology***
- ***Tragedy: Empathy and Modernity***
- ***Means and Ends: Empathy in Education and the Helping Professions.***

Panel discussions will consider empathy in contemporary scholarship and practice, exploring empathy’s transformative potential—and potential limitations—across lines of race, gender, religion, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and other cultural and geopolitical boundaries, often with an eye toward empathy’s operation in the “real world” and its increasing appearance in the discourse of popular culture.

In addition to panels, in which there will be ample time for audience and inter-panel conversation, we will present two **roundtables** akin to the “Fred Friendly Seminars” (a PBS program) format in which a panel of diversely situated experts are given a series of hypothetical situations or discussion questions relating to issues of empathy in daily life. Questions will be formulated prior to the staging of these panels both by the conference organizers and audience. The roundtables will be produced for radio broadcast on WSUI.

Artistic representations, explorations, and enactments will constitute another important part of this conference. Part creative process, empathy is available to us through the imagination. The arts—most particularly, the narrative arts—will be considered as a primary means of providing empathic experience and instruction beyond the limits of lived experience. Each panel or speaking event will begin with readings and short performances that are illustrative of this process.

In addition to **Cherrie Moraga**, featured speakers include:

- primatologist **Frans de Waal** (Emory University), who will speak on the possibility of animal empathy, providing evidence of empathy in our closest primate relatives. He will also discuss the implications of these findings on theories of human evolution.
- **Temple Grandin**, professor of animal science at Colorado State University and designer of humane animal slaughter facilities, who experiences empathy with cows and other domestic animals as a component of her autism.
- **Cameron McCarthy**, professor of communication and educational policy studies at the University of Illinois, who has written extensively about race, multicultural curricula, and identity and representation in Education.
- **Bob Shacochis**, fiction writer and essayist, graduate of the Iowa Writers' Workshop and previous winner of the National Book Award, who engages the question of the limits of the imagination in the production of the empathic arts.
- **Page duBois**, Professor of Classics and Comparative Literature at the University of California, San Diego, who is currently working on the question of empathy for slaves in Plato and in ante-bellum America.

These participants are joined by others, both from within the University of Iowa and elsewhere.