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Is Empathy Gendered and, If So, Why? An Approach from Feminist Psychological Anthropology

CLAUDIA STRAUSS

ABSTRACT *Difference feminists have argued that women have special virtues. One such virtue would seem to be empathy, which has three main components: imaginative projection, awareness of the other's emotions, and concern. Empathy is closely related to identification. Psychological research and the author's own study of women's and men's talk about poverty and welfare use in the United States demonstrate women's greater empathic concern. However, some cross-cultural research shows greater sex differences in empathy in the United States than elsewhere. This combination of findings (women tend to demonstrate greater empathic concern, but this typical difference varies cross-culturally) requires a complex biocultural explanation, drawing on cognitive, psychoanalytic, and feminist theories. Explanation, and not just description, is a prerequisite for change. [empathy, sex differences, difference feminism, poverty, welfare, U.S. culture]*

We are the most industrialized country in the world. We have the most money in the world. It's a sin to have people across from the White House that are homeless, people that are dying because they didn't have medical coverage. Stop building weapons so much—this might come back to haunt me some day [laughs] but I just don't understand, I don't understand why we can't provide more for our people. The world has problems. There are all these things that should be fixed and I just don't understand, the nation that we are that we can't provide for our people. It just doesn't make sense to me.

—Mathew Healey

And I think there are homeless people who are people who had jobs and lost them and lost houses and would like to go to work again. And then they become embittered and

angry. I'd be embittered and angry if I was living on the street. I think about myself taking showers twice a day . . . In the summertime I get hot. You know? I take showers twice a day. What if I couldn't wash my hair, I don't know what I'd do. You know, these little things that you take so for granted stop being, stop being real.

—Linda Fuller

The above quotes were taken from interviews I conducted in 1995 on the subject of poverty and welfare. Mathew Healey and Linda Fuller (both pseudonyms) each evinced considerable concern about homelessness in the excerpts I have quoted. However, the ways in which they expressed their concern differed. Mathew's concern is put in general and abstract terms: It is a sin to have people suffering from want in a country this wealthy. Linda Fuller, by contrast, imagines herself in the position of someone who is homeless, focusing in particular on some of the feelings such a person might have. This is an example of empathic thinking, and it seems to be more characteristic of women than men in the United States.

This article summarizes the large number of psychological studies of sex differences in empathy, then presents my work, drawing on open-ended talk, on this topic. Unfortunately, not enough research has been done cross-culturally on sex differences in empathy; what little I could find on this topic will be discussed, as well. By and large, the cross-cultural studies show the same sex differences as in the United States but with intriguing variation in the extent of difference. Finally, I consider how to explain these findings. The large body of research on this topic convinces me that there is a tendency for women to show greater empathic concern than men. The question is why. In the last section of the article, I review a variety of theories (including evolutionary psychology, feminist object relations, practice theory drawing on neoassociationist learning psychology, childhood patterns of peer interaction, and adult differences in power) that could explain the phenomenon.

We have a tendency in anthropology either to talk vaguely of gender construction without explaining what that means or to depend on one favored psychological theory. The relation of gender, culture, and empathy calls for both more specificity about gender construction and greater openness to a variety of possible explanations, each of which may have part of the truth. This is particularly important as we consider the claims of difference feminists, who have argued that women have special virtues not typically found in men. Difference feminists may be right in the case of empathic concern, but a much more nuanced explanation that combines biology, psychology, and culture is needed to explain

this typical difference than feminists or cultural anthropologists usually provide.

EMPATHY AND FEMINIST ETHICS

Empathy comes in different flavors. Psychologists have particularly distinguished cognitive from affective components of empathy. The cognitive aspect of empathy is awareness of another person's feelings; the affective aspect is an emotional reaction to another's feelings, in particular, "an affective response more appropriate to [their] situation than to one's own" (Hoffman 1993:648). Although awareness of another person's feelings is a necessary prerequisite for a sympathetic affective response, it is not sufficient. One could be very good at figuring out others' feelings for the sake of manipulating them. Thus, my focus here is on empathy as encompassing both a cognitive and affective aspect. I would define empathy as a sympathetic affective response, based on awareness or imaginative reconstruction of another's feelings. When I say a "sympathetic affective response" I mean *sympathy* as a blend of its meanings of commiseration and fellow feeling (Oxford English Dictionary [OED] Online 2003:3b and c). In other words, this is a feeling that is in concordance with another's feelings without necessarily duplicating them, one that is compassionate regarding others' misfortune but not restricted to pity because one can sympathetically share in another's pleasure as well as pain, and pity could be taken as condescension if the other does not wish to be pitied (Koehn 1998:57). This definition is meant to rule out the kind of emotional response that psychologists have called *personal distress*, which is a feeling of personal discomfort caused by another's distress (Batson et al. 1987; Davis 1996:106).

In current American English usage, it is common to confuse *sympathy* and *empathy*. From the definitions of *sympathy* and *empathy* in the OED, it appears that sympathy captures more of the affective component of a feeling shared with or affected by or favorable to another, whereas empathy, which OED defines as "The power of projecting one's personality into (and so fully comprehending) the object of contemplation," originally had a larger cognitive component; indeed, it was first used to discuss art appreciation. In Japan, as Takie Lebra has pointed out, empathy (*omoi-yari*) can include identification with and anticipation of the desires of a status superior, which is quite different from the prototype U.S. scenario of empathy for someone less well off than oneself (Lebra 1976; and personal communication, January 2004). The term *empathic concern* has been adopted for the particular form of empathy consisting of "feelings of sympathy and compassion for unfortunate others" (Davis 1996:57). Empathic

concern, of course, is particularly appropriate for feelings about persons in poverty, the topic of my research.

Empirical research has strongly linked empathy (both as a temporary state and long-term trait) to altruistic behavior (Eisenberg and Miller 1987). Empathy gives a basis for moral action based not on how you would like to be treated (as with the Golden Rule), but how the other would. However, some moral philosophers have criticized empathy as a source of moral action. Although Martin Hoffman sees empathy as the basis of morality, he does note that empathy is likely to be stronger toward people who are known or seem similar to oneself than toward people who are less well-known and seem different. Furthermore, empathic concern is more likely to be aroused by someone who is present or who is currently distressed than someone who is absent or whose situation is likely to lead to distress in the future but is not distressed at present (Hoffman 1993:667). If one shares another person's feelings, "one is likely to be carried along by one's sympathy and drawn into the other's projects regardless of the wisdom of doing so," which "preempts moral reflection" (Meyers 1994:32). Thus, the following analysis does not assume that if women tend to be more empathic than men, that they are necessarily more moral than men. In particular, the kinds of antipoverty policies favored by my interviewees were better predicted by their class than their sex.

One does not have to be a feminist to highlight the moral importance of empathy or sympathy. According to Hoffman, David Hume (1957) and Adam Smith (1948), among other Enlightenment philosophers, made sympathy the basis of social life. In recent years, however, it has been feminists who have particularly elaborated moral theories that center on empathy, often in contrast to a less-affective "justice" orientation, that is, moral principles based on impartial rules of fairness.

A major source for feminist ethics has been the conclusion of Carol Gilligan, drawn from interviews with mostly middle- and upper-middle-class U.S. men and women at different ages, that women's moral reasoning is more likely than men's to employ an "ethic of care," the core of which is "not to turn away from someone in need" (Gilligan and Attanucci 1988:73), rather than impersonal justice, the core of which is "not to treat others unfairly" (1988:73). Gilligan approvingly cites research that shows, "the moral judgments of women differ from those of men in the greater extent to which women's judgments are tied to feelings of empathy and compassion" (Gilligan 1982:69). Gilligan is careful to say that the association of different moral voices with each sex "is not absolute . . . [and not intended to] represent a generalization about either sex. . . . No claims are made about the origins of the differences described or their distribution in a wider population, across cultures, or through time" (1982:2; see also Gilligan 1993). However, quotes like the first one of Gilligan's above and

the whole weight of her analysis is intended to show that women (at least, U.S. women) are more likely than men to develop an ethic of care.

Gilligan's work, along with that of such feminists as Sara Ruddick (1989), Nel Noddings (1984), and Diana Tietjens Meyers (1994; who draws on the psychoanalytic work of Jessica Benjamin, Nancy Chodorow, Julia Kristeva, and Luce Irigaray), are often cited as examples of *difference feminism*. This is a term with two common meanings: It can refer to theories that emphasize differences among women or theories of women as essentially or at least typically different from men in ways that show women to advantage. The latter sense is the one I am using here. As Nancy Chodorow notes,

In contrast to the beginning of the contemporary women's movement, there is now a widespread view that gender differences are essential, that women are fundamentally different from men, and that these differences must be recognized, theorized, and maintained. This finds some political counterpart in notions that women's special nature guarantees the emergence of a good society after the feminist revolution and legitimates female dominance, if not an exclusively female society. [Chodorow 1997:9]

Among feminists, difference feminism is highly controversial. Chodorow (1997) rejects it (even though her research influenced Gilligan, Meyers, and other difference feminists; see also criticisms by Scheper-Hughes 1992 and Stack 1990), and the first website Google returned when I searched *difference feminism*, ButterfliesandWheels.com, scathingly remarked:

We thought we had escaped the tyranny of low expectations for women, we thought we had crashed that prison and freed ourselves to be as tough and hard-headed and autonomous and wide-ranging as men—and now here come the beaming Ed School professors to tell us No, no, that's all wrong, that's the male way of doing things. We are women and we have to park our brains at the door and be nice and warm and caring and empathic and fuzzy. That's the sort of thing that makes a self-respecting feminist want to be as opinionated and cold and uncompromising and downright ruthless as she can find it in her to be (Benson 2003).

What does the research show?

SEX DIFFERENCES IN EMPATHY IN THE UNITED STATES

Psychological Studies

There is insufficient space here to do justice to the great volume of psychological studies on sex differences in empathy. A more detailed discussion is available from the author. Overall, despite the stereotype of “women's intuition,” women are not consistently better at detecting others' thoughts and feelings (cognitive empathy). However, it does seem

clear that among Euro-Americans, at least, women are more likely than men to show empathic concern.

Regarding cognitive empathy, the evidence for sex differences is mixed. On the one hand, Hall (1984) notes that women and girls are generally better at determining the emotion depicted in pictures or videos without verbal cues (Graham and Ickes 1997 and Eisenberg and Lennon 1983). On the other hand, sex differences seem to be contingent on details of the experimental situation: for example, giving feedback and monetary incentives reduces sex differences to statistical non-significance (Klein and Hodges 2001). Snodgrass (1992; see also 1985) found that a subject's role in a simulated boss–employee interaction was more important than their sex in accounting for their accuracy in describing the participants' feelings during the interaction: “employees” were more sensitive to how the “boss” felt about them, whereas “bosses” were more accurate at detecting how the “employee” felt about her- or himself.

When we turn to measures of the affective component of empathy and empathic concern, in particular, a different picture emerges (Hoffman 1977). The largest number of such studies are self-report questionnaires such as Mehrabian and Epstein's Questionnaire Measure of Emotional Empathy (questions such as, “I tend to get emotionally involved with a friend's problems”; Eisenberg and Lennon 1983:115) and Davis's Interpersonal Reactivity Index, especially the Empathic Concern scale (questions like, “I often have tender, concerned feelings for people less fortunate than me” and “When I see someone being taken advantage of, I feel kind of protective towards them”; Davis 1983). All 22 studies of the latter sort reviewed by Eisenberg and Lennon (1983), drawing on subjects from first grade through adults, showed stronger female empathy. In 20 of these studies, the differences were highly significant: “Especially for adults, the sex differences were frequently so large that they were significant at higher than the $p < .000000001$ level” (Eisenberg and Lennon 1983:116; see also Lennon and Eisenberg 1987 and Davis 1996).

Perhaps such self-reports on questionnaires primarily measure sex differences in self-presentation (Batson et al. 1987; Eisenberg and Lennon 1983). Still, differences in how one wants to be seen could affect one's behavior. Some evidence that behavioral differences can be observed comes from studies in which teachers and peers give higher empathy ratings to girls than boys, but, as Eisenberg and Lennon (1983) note, those ratings could be influenced by gender stereotypes, as well. More persuasive is Lennon and Eisenberg's review of several studies finding that women were more likely than men (all studies but one involved adults) to report feelings of concern in response to audiotapes, videotapes, or simulated situations of distress such as seeing another shocked (Lennon and Eisenberg

1987:201). More recently, Eisenberg et al. (1991) found that not only did women report more feelings than men of sympathy on watching videotapes designed to elicit that feeling but they also had a greater increase in skin conductance while watching the videos. Furthermore, in a review that looked at the relation between different measures of empathy and altruistic behavior, Eisenberg and Miller have found that empathy scores on self-report measures tend to correlate positively with prosocial behaviors such as volunteering to assist others and time spent helping callers to a crisis hotline (Eisenberg and Miller 1987:300–301).

Related evidence comes from Gilligan and Attanucci's (1988) research on the moral orientations of U.S. males and females (in one study, private high school students; in a second study, upper-middle-class adolescents and adults; and in a third study, first-year medical students). Participants were asked to discuss "a situation of moral conflict where you have had to make a decision but weren't sure what was the right thing to do" (p. 78). Nearly equal proportions of female (35 percent) and male (33 percent) participants balanced justice and care considerations in their discussions—a moral approach that Gilligan and Attanucci imply is ideal. However, virtually all of the remaining male participants (65 percent of the total) invoked justice considerations primarily; only one man invoked care considerations primarily. The remaining women were more evenly divided, with 35 percent invoking care considerations primarily and 29 percent invoking justice considerations primarily. Although empathy ("a sympathetic affective response, based on awareness or imaginative reconstruction of another's feelings") is not exactly the same as a care ethic in moral dilemmas (i.e., one that focuses on interpersonal relatedness and concern for particular others' needs), they are clearly related (Hoffman 1993:676).

One odd aspect of Gilligan and Attanucci's study of medical students concerns the effect of ethnicity. The ethnic minority first-year medical students who participated (about half of the total sample were African American, Latino, or Asian American) were significantly more likely than the Euro-American students to have a justice focus in their discussion. This contrasts with Carol Stack's finding that both the male and female African Americans she studied (return migrants to the South from northeastern cities) tended to show a pattern of responses to moral dilemmas that was similar to that of Gilligan's female interviewees (Stack 1990:23; see also Lamont 2000).¹ Gilligan and Attanucci comment on their first-year medical student finding, "The focus on justice by minority students is of particular interest since it counters the suggestion that a care orientation is the perspective of subordinates or people of lower social power and status" (p. 83). Possibly the explanation lies in the mix of ethnicities participating in Gilligan and Attanucci's study, or possibly the effect of

being first-year medical students. Gilligan and Attanucci found that the whole sample of first-year medical students was much more likely to use a justice orientation in discussing their moral dilemmas than were their other two samples and there were also a very large number of medical students who could not or would not describe a situation of moral uncertainty. They speculate that first-year medical students are reluctant to admit to uncertainty and perceive that an unemotional justice orientation is appropriate to their new role. Possibly the ethnic minority students felt even more pressure than Euro-American students to employ a justice orientation in that situation.

Gilligan and Attanucci's research—on moral orientations, rather than empathy per se—is the only study by psychologists based on open-ended conversation. What does empathy look like in less-structured talk? And does the same pattern of sex differences in empathic concern hold up with this kind of data?

Empathy in Talk about the Poor

In 1995 I interviewed 17 men and women in two U.S. states (Rhode Island and North Carolina) for their opinions about the U.S. welfare system, which at the time was a topic much in the news as the U.S. Congress and President Clinton considered sweeping cutbacks in the federal anti-poverty program. Several years later, asked to write something about feminist psychological anthropology for the conference that led to this set of articles, I looked over my interview transcripts to see whether the sex of the speaker made a difference in the way they talked about poor people. To my great surprise, it did. Although my female and male interviewees were alike in expressing a mixture of condemnation of welfare recipients and concern for poor people, the way in which they expressed their views differed. For the women, sympathy seemed to be based on imagining themselves in the place of a welfare recipient and reconstructing the feelings of someone in that situation. The men were much less likely to do that or to identify in any way with people in poverty.

To check on my impression of a sex difference, I first culled from each interviewee's transcript the passage in which I judged them to have expressed the most concern for people on welfare or in poverty. Although several interviewees made disparaging comments about welfare recipients, everyone, at some point, expressed some concern for people in that situation. I focused on these passages because I was particularly interested in whether there was a difference in the way men and women expressed any concern they felt and because it was not practical to obtain ratings of the complete transcripts, which ran to an average of approximately 15 pages per interviewee for the first interview alone. To rule

out a possible bias because of my knowledge of the interviewees and the topic of this study, I asked three women and three men to rate each of these passages on a one-to-five scale for one of three aspects of empathy: *imaginative projection* (“Does the speaker seem to be imagining what it would be like to be in the position of someone who is poor or on welfare or considering welfare? Is it as if they were looking at the issue from the perspective of such a person?”),² *awareness of the other’s emotions* (“Does the speaker seem to be aware of the *feelings* of someone who is poor or is on welfare or considering welfare? This means not just understanding about the situation, but cognizant of the emotions someone would feel”), and *concern* (“How concerned would you say the speaker was about the situation of someone who is poor or is on welfare or considering welfare?”). Raters were not told this was a study of sex differences and interview excerpts were not accompanied by any information about the speaker.³ Most of the raters did not report this to be a difficult task; the one exception was a man who was not sure how to rate *awareness of the other’s emotions* if the topic of the passage had nothing to do with emotions.

The average scores of the raters revealed definite sex differences. In each of these three aspects of empathy (*imaginative projection*, *awareness of the other’s emotions*, and *concern*; see Table 1) the passages spoken by women had a higher average rating than the passages spoken by men. Even with the small sample, the difference was large enough in the first two categories to be significant or near-significant (one-tailed *t* test, $p < .05$ for *imaginative projection* and $p < .06$ for *awareness of emotions*).

Table 1. Average Ratings of Components of Empathy in Talk About the Poor

	Imaginative Projection	Awareness of Emotions	Concern
Women’s passages (N = 10)	4.1	3.7	4.2
Men’s passages (N = 7)	3.3	2.9	3.9

Looking at imaginative projection, in particular, reveals a qualitative as well as quantitative difference between my male and female interviewees: there was a typical sex difference in how and why they imagined themselves in another’s position. In two cases in which my male interviewees took the perspective of someone who was poor, they did so only to try to comprehend behavior that was hard for them to understand. In other words, they showed the first component of empathy (imaginative projection) without the other two (awareness of emotions or concern):

- Claudia Strauss:** Why do most people go on welfare, do you think?
Peter Vieira (discount store middle manager): I don't know. I was thinking about that the other day. Said, "God forbid if I ever had to be on welfare." What would I do? Well, let's say that, you know, you've got a one-income family, not making enough money to survive, and they're way below the poverty level. Should they get welfare? Okay, she's at home with the child. Grant you, is there any other thing that you can do for them as opposed to doing welfare? [*Continues in this vein. No further imaginative projection.*]
- CS:** Why do most people go on welfare, do you think? Or do you think you can't generalize from your two stories [*about people he knew who had been on welfare*]?
- Mathew Healey** (graduate student): I hate to generalize because then you leave yourself wide open for attack. Why do people go on welfare? Take myself, why would I go on welfare? Um, it would be if I *could not* support myself, if I was at ends, I would have to be at ends [inaudible]. I mean, let's look at it honestly, although my parents wouldn't like it, but if I was older and I had a family—although before I would go on welfare I'm sure they would ask me to live with them. Which would alleviate a rental issue [deletion]. Perhaps because people don't have that family to fall back on, they go on welfare because they just can't make ends meet. If you are a single parent, that's an issue. There are just tons of variables.

Notice in the first example that as soon as Peter Vieira poses the question "What would I do?" he's back in the third person ("you've got a one-income family, not making enough money to survive, and they're way below the poverty level. Should they get welfare?"). Mathew Healey sustains the exercise longer, finally reaching understanding and a little sympathy (average concern rating of 3), although not identification or emotional attunement.

This contrasts with the pattern, much more common for the women, in which taking the other's perspective leads to attention to their feelings and sympathetic concern:

- Melissa Burton** (housewife married to unskilled laborer): [*CS had asked if single adults who can't find a job should get welfare*] I think that it does get depressing. You get discouraged, and you want to stop. I know, you know. [deletion] I've gotten laid off a couple different times. So it's hard to go back out there and look. And it does get discouraging.
- Linda Fuller** (free-lance business writer): And I think there are homeless people who are people who had jobs and lost them and lost houses and would like to go to work again. And then they become embittered and angry. I'd be embittered and angry if I was living on the street. I think about myself taking showers twice a day. . . . In the summertime I get hot. You know? I take showers twice a day. What if I couldn't wash my hair, I don't know what I'd do. You know, these little things that you take so for granted stop being, stop being real.

Louise Sheridan
(occupational
therapist):

And I think that there's a lot of blame towards the poor for being poor. Like, 'Well, you had something to do with it.' 'If you had just pulled yourself up, you know, by your bootstraps and . . .'

Interviewer⁴:
LS:

You say that kind of ironically.

Well, well, I just see it as just a really hard thing to do. I mean, I try to put myself into, in other people's place and I just don't know, you know, living in a place that was *a*, not a home—say living in a welfare hotel. That would be an environment you wouldn't want, wouldn't be pleasant to be in anyway. Then you're supposed to have a great desire to, you know, go out and better yourself and I just don't see that it's possible in such kind of dreary surroundings.

Kathy Costa (nurse):

I think women on welfare are scared. Of course, they are scared. [CS: *Scared of what?*] Well, not having medical for their children. Suppose they get sick one week and don't go to work, they're not going to eat at all. You know what I mean? You weigh that against the security of a check, no matter how small it is, and then there is the daycare issue.

Esther Black
(secretarial-clerical
temp):

When you go to interview and the people don't hire you, you [inaudible] confidence down. You get depressed. Some people are not strong, like other people. Where some people let it affect them to the point that they are so depressed, that they can't even get themselves back on track.

To confirm my sense that women were much more likely to combine imaginative projection with awareness of the other's emotions and concern, I looked at which passages received ratings above 3.5 on the 5-point scale in all three components of empathy. Six of the ten (60 percent) women's passages did, but only one of the seven (14 percent) men's passages did.

It is important to point out that this sample was not selected to test sex differences in empathy for people in poverty and has a serious flaw when used for that purpose: Three of the ten women in this sample (including Esther Black and Kathy Costa, quoted above) had been on welfare themselves previously, compared to only one of the seven men. For these three women, it required very little effort to imagine the feelings of someone in that position. The one man who had received General Assistance after he lost his job and became homeless, Mason Carter, now a storefront minister, showed considerably more empathy than any of the other men; his passage was the only one to receive high ratings on all three components of empathy:

I interviewed some people a few years ago, because I said to myself, "How could a person be a lawyer or a doctor and now he's out on the streets?" Said, "Lord, how could that happen?" I was asking questions, how could a person so high then drop so low, and I interviewed some people. And I was talking to a person that was a doctor at one time and I was talking to a person that was a lawyer one time, out in the street, homeless. And it just something that happened in their life. One testimony that I heard, one of

his children died, and he couldn't handle it, his wife left him. Just tragic things that happened in their lives and they never got over it. It's hard for a mother to get over her son getting killed, especially if he's seven or eight years old, somebody run over him or somebody shoot him. Sometimes it's hard to get over that. And sometimes it just takes time for them to get healed. Because I remember one time in my life that I was so broken hearted for five years, I was just so broken hearted that I used to cry every night. It took me five years to really get healed, it was a process. It didn't happen overnight. There's no overnight remedies.

Mason Carter was also the only man in my sample who was not Euro-American (he is African American).⁵ This is interesting in light of Stack's research, described above, which found her African American interviewees tended to respond to moral dilemmas in a manner similar to Gilligan's female interviewees. However, I should note that Carter commented that before he experienced homelessness himself, he had not had much sympathy for people in that position:

I used to pass by people, homeless people, before I got sick, and I used to look and say, "Why don't these people get up and do this? Why don't these people get up and do that?"

Still, even if we omit the three women who had firsthand experience of welfare, that leaves three more who showed considerable empathy despite the lack of firsthand experience. Some of them knew others who had been on welfare but so did some of the men. For example, Greg Lloyd's sister had been on welfare but he was not particularly sympathetic to welfare recipients, and I only learned about his sister through a passing comment he made in the second interview. By contrast, Melissa Burton's sister-in-law had been on welfare, a fact that Melissa mentioned often in the first interview as making her much more sympathetic to others in that position.

It was especially interesting that some of the women looked for ways to identify with people in poverty or on welfare whereas, except for Mason Carter, even when the men were sympathetic, they described no points of similarity between themselves and the people they were discussing. (If I were to repeat my study, I would consider identification as a possible fourth component of empathy.) Here are some examples of ways in which women at different socioeconomic levels found points of similarity. None of these three had been on welfare:

Melissa Burton
(low income)

[CS had asked what changes are needed in the welfare system. Melissa said she liked the idea of making welfare recipients work. But she went on to excuse them for not working.] I think that once you're in a situation it's hard to get out of. I mean, like anything else. Like here, you know, we're living here and it's nice. But we had said, "Oh we'll be here for a couple years and then we're going to move on, hopefully gonna buy a house."

Well, we're not any further, we don't even have the money to move right now. You know, never mind buying a house. You know, so I think that the people that are even in projects are, it gets even deeper. You know, you just get stuck in a hole and you just can't get out.

Nancy Goodall
(middle
income):

I own my own business. And although I have health insurance that I pay for myself, I feel that if anything catastrophic happened I could rapidly drop down into the poverty level and lose everything I have. So, I see welfare as more of an economic question that I think should be addressed by a lot more people than are portrayed. I feel a lot of times the media portrays it as a "them" where I feel that a lot more people are, I don't know a lot of people who have huge amounts of savings put aside in case something catastrophic happened.

Linda Fuller
(formerly high-,
now upper-
middle income):

I wonder how it is for kids who come from one-parent families and whose mothers then have to go off to work, and I mean that's something that even I've struggled with. I lost my husband a few years ago, and I always thought there would be time for babies, and now I'm alone, and I've thought about adopting a baby, but I'm getting old, and I have to work, and, any, you know, what, I'm not even thinking about the finances. I am wondering how I manage this. You know, I don't have my family here. My family is in the Midwest. [deletion] If you don't have money and have to go to work and are dependent on public funding, then what do you do? Are you not supposed to have children? I mean, that doesn't seem fair.

Although this research has the disadvantage of not balancing gender and welfare experience, it has the advantage, compared to several of the psychological studies described above, of not being susceptible to experimenter-demand characteristics. In contrast to the questionnaire-based studies of empathy reported above, my interviewees had no reason to think they were taking part in a study on empathy and so could not have been influenced by the stereotype that women are supposed to be more empathic. The only possible problem could have been the presence of a female interviewer. (I conducted all of the interviews except one, and that one was conducted by a female graduate student.) Possibly my presence triggered a certain style of emotion talk for my female interviewees, who might have responded differently to a male interviewer. I return to this possibility below in the discussion of theories that might explain the relation of gender, culture, and empathy.

Another limitation of my study, and of almost all of the research discussed so far, is that it is confined to U.S. men and women. Is empathy gendered the same way elsewhere?

CROSS-CULTURAL SEX DIFFERENCES IN EMPATHY

Pasternak, Ember, and Ember's review of cross-cultural studies of psychological differences between men and women claims,

Some theorists suggest that women are more apt to be concerned with interpersonal relationships, and to have more empathy for the feelings of others. To date, studies outside the United States, in Israel and some Asian countries, provide considerable support for this expectation. [1997:64]

Unfortunately, they cite just one study (Stimpson et al. 1992) in support of this conclusion, and it is one, discussed further below, that uses only an indirect measure of empathy. My (admittedly unsystematic) review of the cross-cultural literature has turned up only a little research on the topic. What has been done generally confirms the pattern of greater female empathy, although with intriguing cross-cultural variation in the extent of sex differences.

Eisenberg and Lennon's (1983) review and meta-analysis of several dozen psychological studies regarding sex differences in empathy includes six, employing a variety of measures, with non-U.S. subjects. Their summary tables show that five of the six report a female advantage (three statistically significant); the sixth does not indicate which sex was higher in empathy (Eisenberg and Lennon 1983:109, 116, 121–123). Hall's reviews of a large number of studies have found females better than males at identifying emotions, except anger, on the basis of nonverbal cues (e.g., pictures), across cultures (Brody and Hall 2000:344). Finnish (Myyry and Helkama 2001:35), Israeli (Karniol et al. 1998), and South Asian Indian (Bhandari and Parthi 2000:274–275) female students scored higher than male students in these countries on empathy as measured by self-report questionnaires.

Kashima and several colleagues (1995) note that there are separate research traditions attributing "sociocentric" or "communal" self-concepts to non-Westerners and to women (see Markus and Oyserman 1989) and wondered whether women's self-concepts are other-oriented in the same way as non-Westerners'. They found clear differences. Their Japanese and Korean samples were much more collectivist in putting group interest over individual interest than their Australian and mainland U.S. samples (i.e., more likely to agree with statements like, "I am prepared to do things for my group at any time, even though I have to sacrifice my own interest"); sex differences in collectivism were small and nonsignificant. However, sex differences clearly emerged in *kanjin-shugi* ("between-people-ism" or "emotional relatedness"). The items they list include clear self-report indicators of empathy (highest loaded item: "I feel like doing something for people in trouble because I can almost feel their pains"). In all five of their university student samples (Australia, mainland United States, Hawaii, Japan, and Korea), females were higher in *kanjin-shugi* than males, with the gender difference significant at the $p < .05$ level in Australia, mainland United States, and Japan.

Table 2. Emotional Relatedness (*Kanjin-shugi*) Means (adapted from Kashima et al. 1995, Table 3, p. 930)

	United States	Australia	Hawaii	Japan	Korea
Female	.41	.26	.18	-.23	.20
Male	-.27	-.21	-.03	-.59	.17

If I were to say no more, it would seem that culture has little influence on empathy; women are always and everywhere more empathic than men. However, Kashima et al. also found statistically significant cultural differences in *kanjin-shugi*, which become obvious from the means reported in Table 2.

From this table, it is clear why it is U.S. researchers who have been obsessed with sex differences in empathy: There is a stark gender polarity in U.S. men and women's responses to questions about emotional connectedness. The same is true, to a lesser extent, of the Australian sample. By contrast, although Japanese men and women differ from each other significantly in this measure, neither men nor women feel comfortable affirming relatedness (contrary to the researchers' prediction) and the difference between the Korean men and women is negligible. (As Kashima et al. hypothesized, on almost every scale, the Hawaiian students fell in between the U.S. and Australian samples, on the one side, and the Japanese and Korean samples, on the other side.) I would dismiss the Korean findings as perhaps the result of poor translation or some other confounding factor if it were not for the fact that a cross-cultural study by Stimpson et al. (1992) found that female university students gave significantly higher evaluations than males of such traits as being understanding, sensitive to the needs of others, sympathetic, compassionate, tender, and eager to soothe hurt feelings in China, Thailand, the United States—but not Korea, where the predicted sex differences were found, but were small.⁶ Stimpson et al. explain the Korean exception in terms of peculiarities of their Korean university student sample, but Kashima et al. think their Korean student sample reflects a larger cultural tendency to “place importance on the mutual understanding of true sentiments and feelings” (Kashima et al. 1995:934).⁷

In sum, the cross-cultural research on empathy confirms the picture of greater female empathy, particularly, greater female self-descriptions of empathy, but the extent of the sex difference varies considerably. What theories of the relation of culture, psychology, and gender would explain this?

THEORIES OF GENDER, CULTURE, AND EMPATHY

The simplest explanation of gender differences in empathy is that they reflect nothing more than differences in men's and women's *discourse practices*. Women and men do not have different ways of thinking and feeling, necessarily, just different conventions in their discourse communities. This could explain the sex difference I observed in my interviewees' comments as well as responses to self-report questionnaires. Just as U.S. men typically do not use color terms like "mauve" (Lakoff 1975), they also typically do not respond positively to words like "tender" on questionnaires. This could be called a shallow explanation of the gender differences reported here, in the sense that it does not require much explanation of psychological processes. This shallow explanation, although it could be part of the truth, does not explain why Eisenberg et al. (1991) also found a difference in men's and women's skin conductance when watching sympathy or fear-inducing videos. Also, are discourse practices gendered the same way cross-culturally, for example, in northern India and Finland, where a sex difference in responses to self-report questionnaires was also found? Finally, if true, these norms of speaking in turn require explanation. Why are empathic discourses gendered?

The same issues arise if the explanation is offered, as several psychologists have done (e.g., Davis 1996:60), that empathy is more important in women's identities than men's. This would be consistent with the *symbolic interactionist* explanation that self-concepts are the result of others' expectations. If women are expected to be more empathic, they acquire this self-concept, and as I noted above, self-concept can affect behavior. Still, we would want to know whether women are expected to be more empathic in all the societies in which sex differences have been observed. And why should this expectation arise?

A more complete possible explanation comes from *feminist object relations theory*, a psychoanalytic approach. As Nancy Chodorow explored, influentially, in *The Reproduction of Mothering* (1999), there are important psychological consequences of the fact that mothers are much more likely than fathers to be the primary caretakers of young children. As earlier theorists (e.g., Burton and Whiting 1961) have noted, as well, girls can develop their gender identity as being like that of their primary caretaker, whereas boys' sense of masculinity requires negating identity with their primary caretaker. Compounding these different gender identity issues for boys and girls, Chodorow believes, is different treatment by their mother because mothers experience their daughters as like them and their sons as different from them: "Boys are more likely to have been pushed out

of the preoedipal relationship, and to have had to curtail their primary love and sense of empathic tie with their mother” (1999:166). According to Chodorow, “Girls emerge from this [preoedipal] period with a basis for ‘empathy’ built into their primary definition of self in a way that boys do not. Girls emerge with a stronger basis for experiencing another’s needs or feelings as one’s own (or of thinking that one is experiencing another’s needs and feelings)” (1999:167).

As Jessica Benjamin (1988) developed this thesis, children’s gender identities start forming while they are toddlers, at the same time they are faced with the psychological conflict between their desire to explore and assert themselves, on the one hand, and their desire to remain close and dependent, on the other hand (the *rapprochement* phase or complex). According to Benjamin, mother looms large in the toddler’s unconscious as a symbol of closeness that is comforting but also a threat to the child’s desire to assert him- or herself. Fathers and, by symbolic extension, masculinity are associated instead with independence and power. The result at this stage, she postulates, is that boys and girls dichotomize femaleness and maleness, associating the former with closeness and the latter with separation (Benjamin 1988:104). Toddlers of both sexes still have some of their original identification with the mother, but now they take masculine independence and power as an ideal with which they wish to identify when they want to protect their agency.

Over the next few years, however, young children’s cross-sex identifications are discouraged by caretakers and in popular culture representations. By the time children enter school, girls still idealize a masculine independent self as well as a feminine nurturing self but identify with the feminine self. For boys, however, the feminine ideal is very threatening. They cannot imagine themselves becoming the one who provides the nurturance, only the helpless baby who receives it, so they repudiate nurturance. This is particularly so in the context of a culture in which “nurturance, responsiveness, and physical closeness are [not] valued” because they “are associated exclusively with infancy” (Benjamin 1988:173). The result for boys is “Emotional attunement, sharing states of mind, empathically assuming the other’s position, and imaginatively perceiving the other’s needs and feelings—these are now associated with cast-off femininity” (Benjamin 1988:170).

Interestingly, for my study of empathy for the poor, Benjamin believes that men’s rejection of nurturance and dependence has social policy consequences, leading to “Contempt for the needy and dependent, emphasis on individual self-reliance, rejection of social forms of providing nurturance” (1988:171). Although Benjamin does not spell out why men’s schemas are reflected in social policy more than women’s schemas, this could be explained in several ways. The most straightforward and

obvious way would be to point to the predominance of men in policy-making positions. Benjamin would probably add two points: policy making, as a public sphere activity, is symbolically associated with masculinity, and for both men and women, the autonomous independent father is an ideal.

This theory would explain why, regardless of level of sympathy with people in poverty or socioeconomic standing, my male interviewees—with only one exception, a man who had been homeless himself—did not identify with someone in welfare or poverty in the sense of finding some point of commonality between themselves and the needy other. This was much more likely to occur with my female interviewees, again, irrespective of their overall levels of sympathy or socioeconomic standing. This suggests U.S. men fear admitting vulnerability. But would gender of the primary caretaker alone explain the seeming Korean exception? Probably not. As Benjamin notes, other factors can come into play, such as the extent to which nurturance, responsiveness, and physical closeness are culturally valued as well as the extent to which mothers, women, and femininity are valued or devalued by fathers, in particular, and the public culture, in general. These factors would have to be examined in a variety of societies, to see whether they correspond to patterns of gender differences in empathy.

A completely different psychological theory, *cognitive learning theory*, was employed by Carol Ember to explain the effects of female task assignments on Luo Kenyan boys (Ember 1973). In the community Ember studied there were many more boys than girls. Families that had no girls available to perform what observers agreed were such typically female chores as fetching water, digging root crops, cleaning house, and taking care of babies assigned them to the oldest available boy. Those boys were observed by Ember's assistants to have a behavioral profile in between those of most boys and most girls in that community, showing significantly fewer egoistic behaviors such as aggression to satisfy their own needs and more prosocial behaviors. Interestingly, these effects did not hold for chores these boys did that the Luo considered female but were conducted outside the house; only for female chores performed inside the house (with baby tending having particularly strong effects in reducing aggression and dominance). Similar findings are reported by the Whittings (based on research by the LeVines and summarized in Pasternak et al. 1997): In Kenya, (Nyansongo) Gusii boys, unlike boys in the other societies described by the Whittings and their colleagues, “actually offered help and support to others more often than girls . . . they may have been unexpectedly helpful in Nyansongo because . . . families frequently called upon them to help care for young children” (Pasternak et al. 1997:60).

Ember interprets her findings as showing that assignment of female tasks to boys does not lead them to be then labeled as feminine and identify with all aspects of female roles or to identify with mother and take on all aspects of her behavior. Instead, the effects are closely correlated with what specific behaviors need to be learned in a role. For example, baby tending requires a suppression of aggressive behaviors, but that is not necessary for outdoor chores. Thus, Ember favors an associationist *learning theory* explanation that “a child may acquire certain behaviors because they are necessary to the competent performance of certain tasks. These associated social behaviors, rewarded directly by the supervisory agents or indirectly by the child’s sense of performing the tasks well, should generalize to other realms of behavior” (Ember 1973:427; for a more current neoassociationist learning theory, see Strauss and Quinn 1997, esp. ch. 3). Learning theory is consistent with *practice theories* (e.g., Bourdieu 1977), which also give primary importance to the way schemas are embodied through everyday social practices.

How would an associationist learning theory explain sex differences in empathy? Eleanor Maccoby (1998) argues that a primary explanation for sex differences is that from the late preschool years on, boys and girls tend to divide into sex-segregated play groups. Furthermore, boys’ groups tend to be larger and their play rougher than girls’ groups. This would give the girls more practice in intimate interpersonal communication, facilitating the development of empathy. Maccoby notes that the effects of play are more important than parents’ explicit values and socialization: U.S. parents, at least, tend to discourage aggressive behavior by both boys and girls, but it still occurs with boys if they are triggered by the presence of other boys (Maccoby 1998:292). Parental input emerges as important in another way, however. As Maccoby explains:

[Parents] talk more about feelings with girls than with boys. Starting when the children are toddlers, and continuing into their preschool years, parents talk more often to little girls about how the child is feeling now, was feeling earlier, or might feel if certain things happened. They more often discuss with daughters how a child’s actions make other people feel. [1998:296; see also, Lennon and Eisenberg 1987:196.]

Maccoby’s explanations seem to have a promising fit to the cross-cultural data. Munroe and Romney (n.d.) have found the pattern of larger boys’ play groups (for boys 7–9 years old) in four disparate societies, and exceptional cases, such as Korea, could be explained by the cultural importance of emotional sensitivity for both boys and girls. (Studies of Japanese child rearing, however, have been observed to stress the importance of concern for others’ feelings, e.g., Lebra 1976, so it is puzzling that Kashima et al. found a significant sex difference there as well as negative mean scores for both men and women.)

However, Maccoby's explanation thus far is incomplete. Why are boys' play groups larger and their play rougher than girls'? Why do (at least U.S.) parents talk more often to girls than boys about feelings? In answer to the question of why boys' play groups tend toward a rough style of play, she cites evidence for a hormonal basis:

There are striking similarities between human children and their nonhuman primate cousins with respect to differentiated playstyles and gender segregation. . . . Some physiological processes have been identified. For example, experimental studies in which androgens have been administered prenatally to genetically female monkeys have changed their postnatal playstyles: these young females engage in more rough-and-tumble play than untreated females. . . . Perinatal androgens may also be implicated in the tendency for males to separate themselves more strongly from adults than females typically do. In one study, the administration of an androgen-antagonist to newborn male monkeys delayed their move away from adults and into a male peer group. We see then a modest bit of evidence that the asymmetry between boys' and girls' groups—the greater independence and stronger boundaries of male groups—is influenced by hormones present at or near the time of birth. [Maccoby 1998:290–291]

Regarding the second question, Maccoby speculates that parents consider talking about feelings to be “too ‘soft’ in dealing with a boy,” or that girls' typically faster language acquisition makes it easier to discuss complicated matters or “they may reflect girls' greater willingness to listen to, and participate in, talk about emotions” (Maccoby 1998:296). The last explanation, of course, begs the question of why girls would have a greater interest in talk about emotions. Here, again, there may be a physiological basis. Recent neuropsychological research seems to indicate that women's brains tend to process pictures or words with strong emotional content differently than men's brains. The author of one such study, Turhan Canli, concludes, “The wiring of emotional experience and the coding of that experience into memory is much more tightly integrated in women than in men” (Recer 2002; see also Bremner et al. 2002). This would be consistent with an *evolutionary psychology* argument that men and women have evolved with different psychological responses because these differences were adaptive. For example, it could be argued that because women have, historically, taken most responsibility for care of preverbal infants and young children, they have needed to be particularly aware of and concerned about emotion expression.

It should be remembered, however, that neurophysiological differences in adults are not necessarily innate. Human brains are highly plastic. It could be that the tighter integration of emotion neural circuitry in women than in men is the effect, rather than the cause, of greater practice in noticing and responding to others' emotions.

A last, completely different possibility is that the differences in men and women's empathy are not the result of sex differences but of typical power differences between men and women (Miller 1986). People in

subordinate positions need to be more skilled at figuring out the thoughts and feelings of social superiors than the reverse. Recall that Snodgrass (1985, 1992) found that role was a better predictor than sex of the ability to know what another person feels about you. However, this only explains the cognitive aspect of empathy. Why should subordinates show more empathic concern? One possibility is that knowing typically leads to caring; if one has insight into another's thoughts and feelings, one is more likely to be sympathetic. However, most research does not show a strong sex difference in detecting others' thoughts and feelings, so that does not seem to be the explanation. A more likely explanation is that women's economic and power disadvantages—still present in the United States as well as the other societies discussed here—lead them to be worried that they themselves might be in need someday, hence more sympathetic with others in that position. Thus, with respect to my interviewees, it could be argued that even the women who had not personally experienced welfare or poverty would find it easier than the male interviewees to see how they could end up in that position, hence be more concerned about people in that situation. This is a realistic concern, given the feminization of poverty. Similarly, perhaps women are more likely to agree with questions like, "I often have tender, concerned feelings for people less fortunate than me" and "When I see someone being taken advantage of, I feel kind of protective towards them" because they can imagine that they themselves will be less fortunate or be taken advantage of.⁸

Most likely, several of these factors are at work. It is unlikely there is an empathy gene. However, possibly women have a slight innate edge in emotion processing, which, along with a tendency to more intimate play groups, leads to greater practice in detecting and responding to others' emotions. Gender stereotypes could be formed as a result, which lead to social expectations, personal identities, patterns of behavior, and discourse practices that reinforce those sex differences. An especially significant factor seems to be that girls are more often assigned chores that require care for others. These factors could be accentuated in societies like the United States in which relations of mutual independence, rather than nurturance and dependence, are seen as ideal. The feminist psychoanalytic explanation then adds U.S. men's defensive need to repudiate sympathy for the dependent because the social division of parenting symbolically equates giving nurturance with femininity. Societies in which it is acceptable for social inferiors to be dependent on social superiors (male or female), or in which men as well as women are encouraged to pay attention to and be concerned about others' emotions, and in which boys are as likely as girls to take care of small children, would be more likely to mold men and women who are equally, or almost equally, inclined to be empathic.

CONCLUSION

Where does this leave difference feminism? Difference feminists had a worthy project: to reverse stereotypes of women's inferiority. Furthermore, Gilligan and her colleagues made an important empirical discovery of "a different voice," the care orientation in morality, which had been overlooked and is more likely to be used by women than men, at least among some populations in the United States. My research reinforces Gilligan and her colleagues' finding of U.S. women's typically distinctive "voice." There are three respects, however, in which my results diverge from those of difference feminists like Gilligan.

First, although empathy has been shown to correlate with altruism and other prosocial behaviors in experiments, the overall effects on behavior are complicated by many other factors, so I would want to be more careful than difference feminists usually are about celebrating the sex differences I found. As I noted at the beginning of the article, men's and women's ways of talking about the poor were not a good predictor of the antipoverty policies they favored in my study. In a related larger survey (Strauss 2002), I found that social class and the kind of interpretive framework that was salient at a given moment, rather than the respondent's sex, explained the extent to which, for example, they favored making health insurance and jobs available to all Americans who need them instead of imposing a time limit on welfare.

Second, difference feminists have conducted insufficient cross-cultural research. The cross-cultural research I found reinforces the critique many have made (e.g., Scheper-Hughes 1992 and Stack 1990) that difference feminism is too blunt a theory to handle intra- and intercultural variation.

Finally, I believe we need to go beyond our all-too-common vague talk of "gender construction" to try to explain, and not just describe, this phenomenon. Without an explanation, we do not know how to go about making changes. Quinn (2000) has critiqued the current trend toward cultural particularism among contemporary feminist anthropologists. Unexplained universalism is the complementary problem of difference feminists. If feminists—whether particularists or universalists—eschew attempts to acknowledge and explain widespread sex differences, the ironic result will be the unchallenged dominance of simplistic genetic explanations. We need to combat these reductionistic explanations because the truth is much more complicated and hopeful.

NOTES

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1. Stack conducted two studies, one with adolescents ($N = 87$) and one with adults ($N = 15$). In the adolescent study, 43 percent of the girls and 42 percent of the boys had a justice focus, 31 percent each of the girls and boys had a care focus, and 26 percent of the girls and 27 percent of the boys had mixed justice and care considerations. In the adult study, the women were more likely than the men to combine justice and care considerations (62.5 percent to 43 percent, respectively), whereas the men were somewhere more likely to have a justice focus (43 percent to 37.5 percent), but the only subject who had a care focus was a man (Stack 1990:23).

2. Elinor Ochs pointed out (personal communication, April 2004) that all projection is imaginative, so it is redundant to use both terms. This is true, but I want to distinguish *empathic projection* from *projection* as that term is used in psychoanalytic theory to describe the unconscious defense mechanism of attributing to others one's own unconscious, forbidden feelings.

3. The two raters familiar with my topic did not produce results different from the rest. Data, including complete instructions for the raters and all the culled passages, are available from the author.

4. Louise Sheridan was interviewed by my research assistant, Haven White (identified as "Interviewer").

5. There were two women of color in my sample: Esther Black, who is Afro-Caribbean, and Anna Monteiro, who is a black Cape Verdean.

6. The traits were measured by a questionnaire from Bem's Sex Role Inventory (Bem 1974), which asked subjects, "Please inspect and rate each of the following descriptors as to its goodness or badness pertaining to social desirability as follows: 1 = a very bad trait; 2 = a somewhat bad trait; 3 = a neutral trait; 4 = a somewhat good trait; 5 = a very good trait" (Stimpson et al. 1992). This is only an indirect measure of Gilligan's caring morality and of empathy.

7. They explain the unexpectedly low Japanese kanjin-shugi scores as follows: "After the war, the Japanese abandoned the traditional values of interpersonal obligations as they were seen to be too closely linked with the ultranationalism of the pre-war government . . . Perhaps, Japanese university students today deliberately and explicitly disavow the relational self" (Kashima et al. 1995:934).

8. Heather Willihnganz (personal communication, April 2004) has proposed still another explanation: There are greater benefits and fewer costs to women's empathy than men's. This, of course, fits *rational choice* theories.

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