

## Identification, Confucianism, and Intersubjectivity: Issues Related with Social Empathy in East Asia\*

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*Social Empathy is the ability to understand different groups of people by perceiving or experiencing their life situations. A Social Empathy perspective requires the ability to recognize differences between one's group and other social groups. It also calls for insight into the contextual environments that create systematic barriers among different social groups. In this sense, social empathy can play a role in resisting the compelling nationalist ethos of the nation-state, as Lui argues in this special issue. In a similar vein, Wang and Nahm suggest that the social empathy of Chinese people based on long-lived historical experiences can bring about a tension with the state-centered ideology of the PRC. Finally, Nishihara highlights how social empathy can promote cosmopolitanism and transnationalism during the times of national disasters. The studies in this special issue allude to the importance of the Social Empathy approach to social research by illuminating different cases of active engagement of diverse groups of society.*

**Keywords:** social empathy, East Asia, identification, confucianism, intersubjectivity

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\*This work was supported by the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Korea and the National Research Foundation of Korea (NRF-2017S1A3A2067374).

## Empathy and Social Empathy

*Empathy*, in general, is considered a condition or an ability of experiencing others' feelings together. The empathetic ability of human beings is necessary for keeping relations with others as a society becomes more culturally diverse than the past. Thus, empathy education in schools is highlighted recently in the age of transnational networks.

It is said that the term of empathy was originated from *Einfühlung*, by German philosopher Robert Vischer in 1872 translating Greek work *Empatheia* meaning "feeling(pathos) into(em)" (Rifkin 2010). Thus, the meaning of *Einfühlung* was to denote the power of projecting one's personality into the object of contemplation.

Even before the term was introduced, David Hume and Adam Smith explored what today we would call empathy although they used the word sympathy at the time. By distinguishing sympathy from pity or compassion, Smith (1759) stressed one's capacity to see others' mind and to experience others' feelings, by fellow-feeling, despite the immediate experience of others' inner life. It can be practiced for one to use his/her imagination to assume others' physical and psychological conditions. Hume (1978) defined sympathy as a part of human nature and as a tendency of accepting others' characteristics and feelings ethically through mutual exchange despite of differences among human beings. In sociological tradition, Mead emphasize the role of sympathy in building the relationship between self and others, saying that "sympathy comes, in the human form, in the arousing in one's self of the attitude of the individual whom one is assisting, the taking the attitude of the other when one is assisting the other (1934, p. 299)."

After the introduction of the term *empathy*, social scientists have used the term to explain active participation in others' situations and feelings, while sympathy is considered a natural instinct of feeling what others experience regardless of full experiences (Kim 2016). For example, American psychologist E.B. Titchener defined the meaning of empathy with emphasis on one's introspection and imagination to apply his/her situation to others based on human beings' cognitive and emotional senses (Titchener 1909, cited by Park 2015). Defining empathy as one's will of meeting the other and embracing differences voluntarily, Kim (2016) explains the ability of empathy in details; 'to accept others' perspective or roles by creativity', 'empathetic interest and fairness', 'empathetic language expression', and 'consideration for the supportive manners and behaviors' based on cognitive, emotional,

expressive, and physical elements..

In short, empathy is not emotional state, but ability to enter into other person's feelings, emotions or experience something from the other person's point of view (Baron-Cohen and Wheelright 2004; Cohen and Strayer 1996; Coleman 2009, p. 248; Decety and Moriguchi 2007). In addition, it is the act of perceiving, understanding, experiencing, and responding to the emotional state and ideas of another person (Barker 2008; Hogan 1969; Pease 1995).

If the empathy can be extended to wider social contexts, it leads to the development of social empathy. Social empathy is the ability to understand people by perceiving or experiencing their life situations. To do so, people need to know the differences between groups and social and cultural conditions making the differences. This is why some argue that the social empathy results in gaining insight into structural inequalities and disparities (Hoffman 2011; Segal 2007, 2011). That is, if one develops social empathy, he/she gets increased understanding of social and economic inequalities, which in turn leads to interests in social and economic justice and societal well-being. In this sense, study of social empathy can suggest a model for the people to think and act for the best interest of others, especially the handicapped, thus helping to achieve social justice.

On the contrary, lacking a deep understanding of others can lead to scapegoating, distrust, and in extreme cases destruction of other cultures. Thus, for example, racism is related to lack of social empathy (Glick 2008; Avenanti, Sirigu, and Aglioti 2010).

Comparing social empathy with interpersonal empathy, Segal (2012) stresses the importance of contextual understanding of systematic barrier and the ability to take the perspectives of other groups. In addition to the conditions for interpersonal empathy such as affective response, self-other awareness, and stepping into the shoes of another, social empathy requires 1) insights into the contextual environments making systematic barriers among different social groups, and 2) the ability to recognize the differences among social groups in terms of their social, cultural, political and economic experiences and try to understand the perspectives of other groups.

## Flexible National Identification, Confucianism, and Social Empathy in Hong Kong and China

Trying to understand various historical developments in the local areas, social empathy can play a role in resisting the compelling nationalist ethos of

the nation-state. In "Flexible and Plastic National Identification in Hong Kong: Its Historical Configuration and Changes since 1997," Tail-lok Lui looks historically at how Hong Kong people have experienced Chinese nationalism in a way that goes beyond either pride in China's rapid economic development or support for the political regime in power. In doing so, he identifies social empathy for Chinese people as the defining feature of Hong Kong people's identity formation with the Chinese nation. Much like E.B. Titcher who interprets empathy as the practice of using one's imagination to apply one's situation to others, Lui sees Hong Kong people's social empathy originating in the sense of sorrow experienced by Chinese intellectuals who took the British colony as a refuge and witnessed yet were at a distance from the tumbling of the old Chinese order and the subsequent turbulent periods of revolutions and the Chinese Civil War. This identification with the historical trauma Chinese people experienced did not translate to political affinity for either the Communist regime in the mainland or the nationalist regime in Taiwan, Lui believes, because of the strategy of allowing ideological competition between both brands of Chinese nationalism (this was so the two would counterbalance each other and thus serve as an impediment to challenging the colonial status of Hong Kong). Following China's economic opening to the world, there was a marked shift in identification towards the Chinese mainland and away from Taiwan, and this provided impetus for the eventual British handover of Hong Kong to China in 1997. Yet since the late 2000s, there has been a growing sense of alienation of Hong Kong people from the Chinese government (particularly the younger generation), and this has included dismay of the plight of Chinese villagers in remote areas when it comes to their vulnerability to natural disasters and the failure of the Chinese government to sufficiently come to their aid. Overall, Lui provides a compelling case for how social empathy can form the basis of a local identity in ways that persist in an era of globalization and transcend the nationalist drive of the state.

In "From Confucianism to Communism and Back: Understanding the Cultural Roots of Chinese Politics," Wang and Nahm use the lens of social empathy to highlight the recent resurgence of Confucianism in the educational curriculum of the People's Republic of China and in doing so casts doubt on the assumption that every society progresses along a linear path towards liberal democracy. They claim that the context for the turn of the Communist state to Confucianism lies in the enduring legacy of two particular cultural genes: the mandate of heaven and strict pious loyalty that they believe have contributed to a statism that is cyclical in nature and views

individuality as a threat to the existing social order. The broad historical view that the authors take involves a very important aspect of social empathy—the macro perspective that recognizes and contextualizes the particular social, cultural, political, and economic experiences a group of people have. At the same time, as the authors suggests, there might be some room to consider the tension between the enduring state-centered ideology of the PRC on the one hand and the historically sustained individualistic lifestyle pursuits and empathetic concerns of Chinese people on the other. As Wang and Nahm remind us, there may still be a democratic society in China's future but it is something that the Social Empathy approach compels us to consider in light of what local actors actually have experienced rather than simply associate the existence and possibility of social change with the European and American civilizational framework.

### Intersubjectivity and Social Empathy for Transculturalism in Okinawa

Social empathy can promote cosmopolitanism and transculturalism based on solidarity gained in during the times of national disaster. In “Intersubjectivity and Transnational Phenomenological Sociology: An Essay on Social Empathy in East Asia from the Viewpoint of Okinawan Issues,” Nishihara provides a theoretical framework for how the Social Empathy perspective can be conceived and applies this framework to the way people of Okinawa have responded to systematic barriers placed upon them in the Cold War and Post-Cold War eras. He sees Social Empathy as akin to social solidarity and traces the concept philosophically to Edmund Husserl's notion of intersubjectivity or the process of interpersonal interactions that form the basis of a shared identity. He goes on to discuss how Alfred Schutz extended the notion of intersubjectivity to that of intercorporeal intersubjectivity or a “mutual tuning relationship,” a process that can be thought of as individuals sharing a sense of space and the present moment much like musicians playing to the same rhythm. Nishihara's theoretical intervention is to zoom out from the Micro to the Macro of this phenomenological sociological framework, relating it to how members of nation-state communities or ‘Imagined Communities,’ as Benedict Anderson calls them, reify their social worlds that they cannot access directly. Envisioning this process of reification beyond the confines of national borders is where he is headed, and we shall get to how he envisions this for the East Asian region in a moment. Nishihara

applies his Social Empathy framework to the case of Okinawa where years of Japanese and American domination over its local affairs have resulted in the unique case of Okinawans calling for independence in ways that rejects the very concept of the nation-state. Despite elections of Okinawan governors who seek to limit or end US military bases, Japanese and American governments have refused to allow for that happen. What has led to this lack of self-determination for the Okinawa people, according to Nishihara, has been the persistence of Cold War conflict relationships particularly those with China and North Korea that allow the US and Japanese governments to justify the continued US military presence in the Okinawan region. This is why Nishihara believes the Okinawans have sought to transcend the practice of reifying the nation-state in their calls for independence and instead promote a vision of Okinawa network-based future society in which anyone regardless of nationality, ethnicity, or geographical location can be a member. Nishihara believes this denational orientation that these Okinawans have come to can serve as a template for a new kind of East Asian regional solidarity, which has up until this point been largely limited to economic partnerships. In promoting this regional solidarity, he beckons us to embrace a Transnational Sociology that on the methodological level involves a focus on contemporary cross-border movement and interaction and at the idealistic level involves a commitment to the vision of a future society that substitutes the reification of national borders for a reification of a larger regional or global community. He considers this vision vernacular cosmopolitanism and prefers to see it as a kind of transculturalism, or the creation of a new hybrid culture, rather than mere assimilation or multiculturalism.

## Social Empathy as a New Research Approach

As shown in the three papers of this special issue, social empathy plays an important role in various political issues in East Asia. As Wan and Nahm argue, social empathy can help people understand the others in the viewpoints of historically rooted values and identity, thus leading them to keep their lifestyles in the trends of globalization and nationalization. Social empathy can also enhance solidarity among people even beyond national borders, especially during the times of disaster. While Lui notes the national identification of Hong Kong people with their Chinese brethren during times of natural disaster, Nishihara sees the site of the natural disaster area as the place where the transnational form of social empathy is most present because

of how people have deemphasized their particular differences as they engage in mutual aid efforts. Thus, the Social Empathy approach can provide scholars with insights for how we can build transnational solidarity in this conflicting world by nation-states.

Enhancing social empathy can lead people to think and act for the interests of others, thus helping achieve social justice. Thus, studies of social empathy can provide implications to policy makers and members of society so that they can make decisions based on the experiences of those who will be most impacted by the policies. The social empathy approach clearly outperforms conventional methods of social research as long as it broadens our understanding of how to interact with different groups of society without creating unnecessary tensions and conflicts. Policies based on the social empathy approach creates stronger bondage with the community to which such policies are addressed without isolating other groups of society that can be adversely affected by such initiatives. Social empathy necessitates leveling differences through mutual understandings so that policy priorities do not reject any groups that are left out as victims of such priorities and preferences. Instead, the empathetic approach to social research and policies would incorporate as many groups as possible albeit with different priorities and preferences. Our special issue presented in this collection highlights how important the social empathy approach to social research by illuminating different cases of actual engagements by diverse groups of society who utilized empathetic understandings of their differences to hammer out common methods of prioritizing social needs at the time of crisis. Further research in this field warrants support and mutual efforts by scholars in the field.

(Submitted: March 16, 2019; Accepted: March 17, 2019)

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