Abstract

Extended narrative empathy is proposed as a theoretical and methodological approach to studying cultural issues, in this case open defecation in rural India. The approach proposes extending the narrative beyond collecting related narratives and empathizing with the protagonist to inverting the protagonist for the antagonist, asserting cultural humility, extending inquiry, exploring interdisciplinary narratives and balancing empathic immersion with etic concerns.

Key words: culture, extended narrative empathy, empathy, health communication, open defecation

Extended Narrative Empathy and the Culture-Centered Approach:

The Case of Open Defecation in India

Until May 2007, Meera Devi rose before dawn each day and walked a half mile to a vegetable patch outside the village of Kachpura to find a secluded place.

Dodging leering men and stick-wielding farmers and avoiding spots that her neighbors had soiled, the mother of three pulled up her sari and defecated with the Taj Mahal in plain view.

With that act, she added to the estimated 100,000 tons of human excrement that Indians leave each day in fields of potatoes, carrots and spinach, on banks that line rivers used for drinking and bathing and along roads jammed with scooters, trucks and pedestrians. Devi looks back on her routine with pain and embarrassment.

“As a woman, I would have to check where the males were going to the toilet and then go in a different direction,” says Devi, 37, standing outside her one-room mud-brick home. “We used to avoid the daytimes, but if we were really pressured, we would have to go any time of the day, even if it was raining. During the harvest season, people would have sticks in the fields. If somebody had to go, people would beat them up or chase them.”

In the shadow of its new suburbs, torrid growth and 300- ­million-plus-strong middle class, India is struggling with a sanitation emergency. From the stream in Devi’s village to the nation’s holiest river, the Ganges, 75 percent of the country’s surface water is contaminated by human and agricultural waste and industrial effluent. Everyone in Indian cities is at risk of consuming human feces, if they’re not already, the Ministry of Urban Development concluded in September. (Gale, March3, 2009, n.p.)

 Narrative is a powerful form of persuasion. It is the story that so often evokes empathy and calls our attention to serious concerns. Indeed, scholars have been discussing and studying the power of narrative for many years and more recently have been exploring its relation to empathy from both scientific and literary points of view (Keen, 2007). In particular, communication researchers have been applying narrative methodology to health studies using the culture-centered approach to better understand and give voice to the marginalized of the world (Dutta Bergman, 2004). Meera Devi represents one of those subaltern who is suffering the hardships associated with open defecation. We take her story as a starting point to explain a theory of extended narrative empathy. However, it is important for the reader to note that although we initiate our discussion with Meera Devi’s story, there are millions more just like her and the seriousness of open defecation cannot be underestimated.

Open defecation—the practice of depositing one’s fecal matter in open areas such as forests and fields—is a serious problem in developing countries. In fact, in rural India, sub-Sahara Africa and rural China open defecation is on the rise according to the UN (2013). Specifically, 1.1 billion people still defecate in the open without safe sanitary practices. And India is one of the primary countries in need of sanitation action.

More than half of the Indian population (62%) defecates openly. “About 70% of rural Indians don’t use toilets, and 28 million children have no toilet facilities in school” (Lalwani, 2014). Even with the introduction of toilets, unsanitary open defecation is on the rise in 26 countries, and India is the number one offender (Reuters, 2014). Diseases related to open defecation include; “polio, giardiasis, hepatitis A and infectious diarrhea” (Lalwani, 2014), Researchers also found 42.1% of tested subjects in Nepal had geohelminthiasis, specifically, roundworm, hookworms, and whipworms, which were attributed to lack of hand-washing and walking barefoot through feces (Parajuli, Umezaki, & Watanabe, 2009). In addition, recent studies suggest that stunting, which had been attributed to lack of food, or lack of nutritious food, also occurs in well-fed children in India—the cause has been linked to open defecation (Spears, Ghosh, & Cumming, 2013). Other sources mention cholera as a possible concern (UN, 2013). As Mitch Koss, Special Reporter to the Pulitzer Center and member of the *Vanguard* team which has been investigating open defecation, and who makes documentaries for *Current TV,”* explained:

Open defecation—humans defecating outside—is the ugly stepsister of clean water scarcity, which we commemorate on World Water Day. Two-and-half billion people lack access to even simple pit toilets, which is three times as many people as lack access to clean drinking water and results in two million preventable deaths per year, mostly of children under five from intestinal diseases. And yet, you don't hear much about it. Jack Sim, the self-described "evangelist of toilets," from the World Toilet Organization, theorizes that's because "every politician wants to be photographed standing next to a new well, but no one wants to be photographed standing next to a new toilet." And without some portion of the powers that be to drive a story, coverage becomes scarce. (Koss, 2010)

The story is crucial to the cure. Empathy for the people’s plight is necessary in order to expose the problem and encourage solutions. Of course, hearing the story does not necessarily move the receiver of the story to a holistic understanding of the situation. Some theories already advocate the collection of narratives from the subaltern’s point of view in order to move beyond traditional thinking (e.g., western solutions to eastern problems) and we believe this is a step in the right direction. An example of such work falls under the culture-centered approach (e.g., Basu & Dutta, 2007; Dutta-Bergman, 2004; Jamil & Dutta, 2012).

 The culture-centered approach has certainly invoked empathic criteria at its very core by collecting the narratives of marginalized members of society within specific cultural settings for the purposes of giving voice to the subaltern, exposing critical constraints and encouraging local agency (Dutta-Bergman, 2004). A growing number of studies employing the culture-centered approach highlight agency via narrative methodology and specifically encourage the affirmation of the marginalized members’ world view (Basu & Dutta, 2007; Dutta-Bergman, 2004; Jamil & Dutta, 2012; Ford &Yep, 2003). We in no way wish to undermine this approach. We support the culture-centered approach and want only to add to it by offering extended narrative empathy as a means of further refining or contributing to the approach. The culture-centered approach often places the importance of narrative within the methodological section; we wish to point out its theoretical contribution as well.

Extended narrative empathy is a theoretical and methodological approach which is meant to be a companion to the culture-centered approach. Although introduced earlier (Author et al, 2014), it has been inductively developed during our work on a Mellon Foundation Grand Global Challenges grant. The grant was awarded to us to study water and sanitation issues in rural India, specifically open defecation in Uttar Pradesh. We learned from our own engagement with the research project that we needed to extend our understanding (empathy) of the specific local culture beyond the steps provided in the culture-centered approach in order to reach a more holistic understanding of the problem and solutions. We highly encourage researchers to begin with the culture-centered approach but to consider adding extended narrative empathy as a means of further refining knowledge, which in turn, we believe will help in developing shared solutions to global issues.

Extended Narrative Empathy and the Culture-Centered Approach

Currently, the culture-centered approach argues that narrative collection is crucial to understanding the health meanings of the members of a culture (Dutta-Bergman, 2014). Meanings concerning health are not universal, but vary from culture to culture and subsequently need to be taken into consideration (Airhihenbuwa, 1995). If culture is defined in it broadest sense to reflect an interdisciplinary array of practices (e.g., religious, economic, historical, ideological, political), then multiple aspects should be considered in any study of other cultures, especially health studies. Health is not isolated to the body.

In addition, the individual’s point of view must be taken not only as important but as the foundation of agency (Escobar, 1995). One way to do this is through the collection of narratives, giving voice to the meanings and world views of the participants of a study. The culture-centered approach allows the narratives of the individuals to speak of the health situation, providing researchers a means to make sense based on the marginalized, cultural member’s point of view, a view that has far too often been silenced in the past (Dutta-Bergman, 2004).

This approach moves us from a single point of view of the researcher to include the point of view of the health target. Thus, a culture-centered approach provides the first step, but Condit (1993) noted, that cultural approaches are not enough. She argued that the critic as *empath* must listen to multiple voices and demonstrate care. One can assuredly argue that the culture-centered ethnographer is listening to many voices and demonstrating care. For example, in Dutta-Bergman’s (2004) study of the Santali, he interviewed and collected narratives from 32 participants. Certainly he is hearing the voices of many cultural participants. Based on these narratives he provided a story of the general culture, a collective narrative, specifically, the Santali narrative.

A collective narrative (Richardson, 1995) can be developed by gathering the personal narratives of individuals and providing an overall narrative for the group. Dutta-Bergman (2004) collected the stories of Santalis concerning health, happiness and constraints to the good life. He was able to give voice to both individuals and to a culture. Furthermore, he does so in light of the interdisciplinary model which is crucial to gaining a holistic understanding of any problem. Understanding the Santali narrative or any cultural narrative as one that includes economic, religious, historical, and political elements is indeed crucial for global health ethnographers. But at the same time, when a collective narrative is provided it too can silence people through its universalizing nature. Thus, the collective narrative approach has benefits and drawbacks.

The collective narrative is especially valuable as it provides “the possibility for social action on behalf of the collective” (Richardosn, 1995, p. 214). Yet, there are times that individual’s stories or an embedded-culture’s (within the larger culture) stories are lost in the collective story. For instance, even though nearly half the respondents were women in the Santali collective narrative and individual women’s stories were told, they were reported in the research from the “Santali” perspective, not from the “Santali women’s” perspective. In addition, individual stories may have some unique idiosyncrasies. Richardson reminds researchers that any stories “that deviate from the standard cultural plot provide new narratives” (p. 213) and Author (1993, 1998) suggested “sequestered narratives” are not uncommon among the marginalized members of society. Indeed, even stories within stories need to be considered. And counter-narratives should definitely be included (Author, 2006).

We believe the collective narrative via personal narratives is one means to explore global health issues within the culture-centered approach, but we also believe that another approach, extended narrative empathy, can provide additional information that is invaluable to solving global health issues. Before detailing extended narrative empathy, we review empathy, narrative, and narrative empathy, separately. Following these sections, we return to the story of Meera Devi to be discussed in light of the proposed theory and method.

Empathy

 A detailed history of scholarly work devoted to empathy could be traced to antiquity as Aristotle devoted extensive thought to understanding and explaining pathos, empathy’s forerunner.[[1]](#endnote-1) Aristotle asserted that both the speaker and the audience must be in the “right frame of mind” (Book 11, 1, 1-25—Barnes, 1984), meaning the emotional state necessary to arouse the intended response. One must be able to feel the emotional connection, or pathos πάθος, in order for ethos and logos to have bearing. He did not restrict the emotions to sympathy or pity. He wrote at length of the variety of emotions including anger, calmness, friendship, enmity, fear, confidence, shame, shamelessness, admiration, kindness, altruism, pity, indignation, envy, desire, emulation, and so on (Book 11, 1-12). “The emotions are all those feelings that so change men [sic] as to affect their judgment and that also are attended by pain or pleasure” (Book 11, 1, 21-22).

 Pathos and identification link to empathy ἐμπάθεια (*empatheia—in passion*) in that empathy is a praxis—felt, embodied, engaged—way of relating or identifying with some other being. Kenneth Burke (1937/1969) asserted that identification is central to persuasion as it is the ability to relate to the speaker. But empathy is not simply being persuaded; it is also understanding. Or as Burke noted it is crucial to achieving common ground and consubstantiality.

Ethnographers are less likely to draw upon these classic rhetorical origins and more likely to draw from Max Weber’s (1947) notion of *verstehen,* which refers to understanding from the other’s cultural point of view, when addressing empathy. While it is unlikely we can ever reach a full and pure empathy or *verstehen*, the attempts to do so via the culture-centered approach are praise-worthy. Albeit, the idea of over-empathizing has been a source of debate, as well. Specifically, Clifford Geertz’s classic work on interpreting cultures (1973) and his now famous article on the native’s point of view (1974/1977) led to discussions and debates surrounding the role of emic and etic approaches to ethnography. Xia (2013) suggested that we need both and explained the function of each:

Emic knowledge and interpretations are those existing within a culture, that are ‘determined by local custom, meaning, and belief’ (Ager and Loughry, 2004: n.p.) and best described by a 'native' of the culture. Etic knowledge refers to generalizations about human behavior that are considered universally true, and commonly links cultural practices to factors of interest to the researcher, such as economic or ecological conditions, that cultural insiders may not consider very relevant (Morris et al., 1999). (n.p.)

The culture-centered approach seems to be in alignment with the belief that both emic and etic approaches are important. For example, we noted previously that Dutta-Bergamn’s (2004) study gave voice to the personal view of the cultural participants and did so under an analytic frame that incorporated politics, religion, history and poverty. In other words, emic and etic do not have to be mutually exclusive. Empathy may include the participants’ views as well as those of the researcher. An approach that encourages empathy will companion well with the culture-centered approach as it contains both emic and etic. The important part is recognizing the relevance of each (both what the researchers bring to the interpretation and hearing the voices of the marginalized) and being able to take action accordingly. For instance, the early justification in this article for studying open defecation is because it is a health problem and this is generally the view among western scholars, but economic and social concerns are raised more often by people of India than are the health concerns (Pattanayak, et al., 2009). The first is etic, the other emic. The participants’ narratives and understanding those narratives are a crucial component to any intervention.

Narrative

In the 1980s, two humanities journals published special editions on the topic of narrative: *Critical Inquiry*’s 1980 volume titled *On Narrative* and *Journal of Communication*’s 1985 issue titled *Homo Narrans: Story-telling in Mass Culture and Everyday Life.*[[2]](#endnote-2) *On Narrative* highlighted the works of Hayden White, Roy Schafer, Jaques Derrida, Frank Kermode, Nelson Goodman, Victor Turner, Paul Ricoeur and Ursula Le Guin, who covered such areas as narrative history, philosophy, anthropology, psychology and literature (see Mitchell, 1980). The *Journal of Communication* published a series of articles that centered on Walter Fisher’s proposed narrative paradigm, including supportive as well as negative critiques of his theory. The debaters came from various subfields of communication, but were primarily written by rhetoricians.

Earlier, Fisher (1984) had posited that narration is the foundation of human communication. He argued that “all sorts of symbolic action,” most notably narrative, could be invoked in order to reason (p. 1). Fisher relied on MacIntyre (1981), who noted that “man [sic] is…essentially a story-telling animal” who “enact[s] dramatic narrative” which is the “essential genre for the characterization of human action” (p. 200). This gave Fisher a framework for proposing a narrative paradigm—a theoretical means for understanding and explaining human experience through a “narrative context: history, culture, biography, and character” (p. 3). Fisher claimed that narrative is “germane to social and political life” (p. 3). Across his various articles he credited others, such as Cassier (1944), Langer (1942), and Burke (1968) as well as a host of postmodern philosophers and the contributors of the 1980 *Critical Inquiry* special edition mentioned earlier. For instance, and perhaps most notably, Fisher relied on Burke who suggested that people are drawn together into communities that “sanction” their stories and position them in history as a part of humanity. More specifically, Fisher, described people as storytellers who make decisions based on “good reasons” that are grounded in narrative judgment which is driven by their historical/cultural and personal backgrounds.

Fisher also posited that “*narrative probability,* that is, what constitutes a coherent story” and “*narrative fidelity*” that is, what makes a story “ring true” are the bases of human logic (p. 8). Drawing from Angel Medina (1979), who asserted “human reason is narrative” (p. 30), Fisher applied the paradigm to the debates over nuclear weapons and the role of lay public. Specifically, he drew the conclusion that lay people by way of narrative could join a debate that had been closed to them and open only to “experts” and politicians (p. 13). Allowing the public a place in the debate also allowed them to join “the quest for the good life” (p. 18). Relating this to the culture-centered approach one can note that people’s health meanings and narratives of defecation needs and desires must be considered as authentic, valuable contributions to the solution of the problem. Experts alone, whether they are health experts, sanitation engineering experts, cultural or political experts, cannot solve the problem alone.

Academic debates followed the publishing of the narrative paradigm articles, (Gerbner, 1985), which in turn gave way to articles that addressed the potential that narrative studies might hold (Bennett & Edelman, 1985; Bormann, 1973; Haynes, 1989). Kirkwood (1983, 1985, 1992) asserted that narrative provides the means to help individuals escape from their limited views of the world. Invoking an Aristotelian approach, he added that fidelity and plausibility needed to be expanded to include passion and imagination that would lead to future possibilities for the “good life.” It is this good life that the extended narrative empathy approach encourages by way of sharing the marginalized members’ stories and by encouraging a collection of narratives from the marginalized to experts (and in between) on the topic. Multiple narratives, from multiple perspectives, may increase complexity, but may also expand empathy and understanding.

Narrative Empathy

Recent work on empathy crosses disciplines from neuroscience to literary criticism (Keen, 2007). Indeed, a symposium on “virtuous empathy” called for interdisciplinary efforts to study, understand, and promote empathy (Virtuous empathy,2013).[[3]](#endnote-3) Keen (2007) explained this recent surge in exploring empathy as related to recent discoveries in neural science and the mapping of the brain. Specifically, the discovery of *mirror neurons*—the activation in the brain that occurs as we feel empathy—has encouraged more in-depth study into empathy and its role in reading. Narrative empathy—relating through stories in particular--is at the heart of current philosophical and educational debate.

 Relevant studies have been exploring empathy and actions aroused from it. Specifically, Oliner and Oliner (1988), studied people who rescued and hid Holocaust survivors, they showed that although some held strong personal ideologies of justice, the most dominant characteristics associated with these brave and altruistic acts were seeing the victim as innocent, attractive and most importantly like themselves. Indeed, 87% of the rescuers characterized the victims as similar to themselves. Identification, Burke’s (1937/1969) concept of rhetoric, ruled their behavioral response related to empathy. This example of real life empathy has raised questions as to whether real life empathy can be aroused fictional narrative empathy. Keen (2007) worries that too much faith is being placed in empathy for a novel’s character to lead to solid civic action and justice-oriented behavior.

In a detailed overview of empathy-related literature, Keen (2007) found that narrative empathy—specifically that empathy associated with fictional stories--is not enough to bring justice into the world. She drew from psychological studies to argue that empathy may have various outcomes. One may feel empathy to the point of altruism, but one may just as likely feel empathy for someone being tortured and then be incited to flee—having a flight response rather than a helping response.

To the contrary, Jurecic (2011) drew from philosophers such as Richard Rorty (1989) and Martha Nussbaum (1997) to argue the value of literature in teaching empathy. Rorty specifically includes, not only novels, but ethnographies as helping to shape empathy:

It is the disciplines which specialize in thick description of the private idiosyncratic which are assigned this job. In particular, novels and ethnographies which sensitize one to the pain of those who do not speak our language must do the job which demonstrations of a common human nature were supposed to do (p. 94)

And Nussbaum argues,

Narrative imagination is an essential preparation for moral interaction. Habits of empathy and conjecture conduce to a certain type of citizenship and a certain form of community: one that cultivates sympathetic responsiveness to another’s needs, and understands the way circumstances shape those needs, while respecting separateness and privacy (p. 90)

Jurecic balanced these perspectives with those of other scholars. For instance, Williams (1958) pointed out that empathy in some cases only generated a fear of getting involved and Berlant (2004, 2008) noted at times empathy resulted in passiveness. In the end, Jurecic concluded that,

the lived complexity of empathy cannot be reduced to an outcome to be assessed, a feeling to be argued out of, or a neurological response…empathy is instead an inexhaustible subject for the practices of contemplation, exploration, and creation…not because it changes our brains, hearts, souls, or political convictions, but because [it] …slows thought down. [And this is]…. the invitation to dwell in uncertainty and to explore the difficulties of knowing, acknowledging, and responding to others (p. 24)

This conclusion is especially noteworthy as we found the more we extended narrative empathy in our project the more it made us slow down and consider the situation more closely. We found ourselves dwelling in moments of uncertainty that provided valuable experiences in the difficulties of knowing and understanding a cultural situation which both demanded humanitarian action and yet decried simple solutions or hasty conclusions.

Extended Narrative Empathy

Extended narrative empathy views culture as unfolding and interrelated narratives that can be interpreted in such a way as to connect the stories of humanity (Author, et al, 2014). Extended narrative empathy recognizes that narratives vary in genre representation including ancestral, historical, political, economic, religious, mythic, (non)fictional, fractionated, personal or collective, to name a few possibilities (e.g., Barthes, 1957/1972; Browning & Morris, 2012; Author, 1997; 2013; Harter, Japp & Beck, 2005; Lyotard, 1979/1984; Sharf, 1990; Tanno, 1994). Narratives moves us toward understanding or empathy and it is understanding or empathy that moves us to listen more closely to the story and connected stories, but this process is not necessarily natural and there are ways to encourage narrative empathy. Extended narrative empathy recognizes that not all stories are handed to us, some may be sequestered (Author, 1993, 1998); we may need to search out the multiple narratives. Further, as we reach out for additional stories, we must recognize our own story. Empathy can only exist in as much as we bring our own story—who we are in some way—to the reading/listening/living with another’s story. Narrative empathy depends on identification and reflexivity.

We are a living body of stories, these stories make up of our knowledge of self and others. These stories might be considered the stocks of knowledge that we bring to situations and that we interpret from new stories. Fore-knowledge, as Heidegger (1927/1996) suggested, will influence interpretation. We add that it will also influence identification and understanding and empathizing with others. Thus, we recognize that narrative extension includes the researcher, reflexivity and listening to the other (Condit, 1993). As Arendt (1977 posthumously) famously pointed out: the more perspectives one can take, the better one will be able to represent others. Thus, we need to find a way to recognize our own fore-structures, or “prejudices” and expand our horizons, as Gadamer (1982) so aptly put it. In short, we are in search of narrative empathy through multiple perspectives and self-reflexivity while recognizing that we are part of cultural and personal narrative ourselves. We bring that narrative knowledge, judgment and reasoning with us.

Extending a narrative refers to expanding the story in multiple directions throughout time and space (Author et al, 2014). This expanding allows empathy to become more encompassing than what could ever be achieved by taking a singular approach or even the collective approach. It allows for new protagonists to emerge and be heard (Author, 2013). One way to initiate this form of interpretation is to first hear and empathize with the protagonist of one story. But this must be done with an eye on who we are in relation to the story, recognizing our own pre-judgments due to our own narrative existence. This means being aware of our own cultural loyalty, and becoming culturally sensitive. This theory suggests a methodology which we initiate by way of beginning with one story, with one protagonist and extending outward in multiple directions.

Unfolding Narratives: A Method of Extending Narrative Empathy

In the current case, the protagonist is Meera Devi who had to walk “a half mile to a vegetable patch outside the village … to find a secluded place” where she could defecate. There were times when she would have to fend off “stick-wielding farmers” in order to ‘do her business.’ She reported going at night to avoid leering eyes of men (Gale, 2009). Empathizing with the protagonist (1) and collecting related stories (2) are means to begin the extending process. This is the approach most commonly used in the culture-centered approach (Dutta-Bergman, 2004). Other ways include (3) inverting the protagonist for the antagonist, (4) recognizing the cultural conundrum of arrogance v. humility, as well as (5) extending cultural inquiry. Finally, (6) empathic immersion balanced by etic concerns is required. Each can be explored by way

 of a variety of narratives, we use political-historical, religious, economic, ecological, and aesthetic narratives.

Collecting Related Narratives

Meera Devi’s story is not uncommon, many others like it exist and could be compiled into a collective narrative of the open defecation plight of women of India. Indeed, during the initial phase of our Mellon Foundation grant work the media reported the heart breaking story of two teenage girls, who like Meera Devi, went out at night to find a secluded place to defecate but instead found themselves in the hands of brutal rapists. After committing the unspeakable act the men also strangled the girls. The girls were found hanging from a tree. One woman said, "If this could happen to them, it could happen to us also" (Singh & Karimi, 2014).

 To empathize with the women’s plight alone would likely lead us to think in terms of finding safe places for women to eliminate (defecate and urinate), but these narratives are part of a larger narrative and so the solution must be more encompassing. We must extend the narrative in Meera Devi’s story to better understand the stick-wielding farmer. We begin with protagonist inversion.

 Protagonist Inversion

 Protagonist inversion refers to exploring the antagonist in the story with open and empathetic concern. Placing the farmer in the privileged position allows one to see Meer Devi’s story from a different perspective. A new story unfolds in which the antagonist becomes the protagonist, not the same story, but rather the farmer’s story.

As noted earlier, more than half of the Indian population defecates in the open, usually on the side of a road, along railroad tracks or in farmers’ fields. Food is easily contaminated by the feces and many farmers understand that it is the leading cause of diarrheal diseases. The famer is protecting his or her crops from the infectious waste by wielding a stick. We can now begin to empathize with the farmer. This methodological step is a form of inversion. We learn from Meera Devi’s story that not only are farmers taking up sticks but so are farm workers in the field: “…During the harvest season, people would have sticks in the fields. If somebody had to go, people would beat them up or chase them.” We have already identified with Meera Devi, but now we can also identify with the farmer.

 Activists did indeed sympathize with the farmers and acted to solve the situation by sending port-a-potties to one area. However, the farmers were quite poor and poverty produces different types of priorities. They saw other possibilities in the air-tight, sanitary portable containers—what better way to store grain in the rainy season they concluded (Gale, 2009). In short, the toilets were not used as toilets. Once again we empathize in a new way. But we also face exploring another narrative position, the cultural conundrum.

The Cultural Conundrum.

 Before we can fully empathize we must recognize our cultural position and the cultural position of others. Activists in the previous story assumed they could easily solve the problem with port-a-potties. Our cultural legacy, a cultural narrative which too often assumes that “we” can easily solve “others’” problems needs to be faced. The opposite of “cultural humility,” a somewhat arrogant “cultural competence” too often motivates our solutions, according to Tervalon and Murray-Garcia (1998). This comes alongside an assumption that our traditions will match comfortably with “their” traditions and that “our” practices are superior. These kinds of assumptions which range from imperialism to innocent ignorance, have been called out by researchers who ask us to consider cultural humility (also see Chiváz, 2012). Cultural humility is required to achieve an extended narrative empathy. First, we must learn more about the other’s cultural position, temporarily suspend our own cultural loyalty, place ourselves in the other’s place and finally become immersed empaths. We begin with learning the other’s historical narrative.

Historical-Cultural Narrative

It was the job of the Dalits to collect “night soil” (i.e., other people’s feces) and carry it to appropriate places for disposal. But Mahatma Gandhi called for everyone to clean their own bucket. He furthermore recommended “tatti par mitti” (soil over shit) or pit latrines that no one would have to clean, wherein feces would ferment into fertilizer over time (Pathak, 2005).

Of course, this story is incomplete as well, as someone must eventually care for the composted waste in the latrines. For without cleaning, the structures, or pit latrines, become dirty and odious. Pathak (2005) found that the underclass preferred not to clean at all, not other’s and not their own latrines. They preferred defecating in the open to using ‘outhouses.’ Cleaning toilets, even one’s own, was associated with a historical narrative that originated in centuries past, centuries of slavery, of being considered “untouchables” and being called “scavengers.”

Religious-Cultural Narrative

Pathak (2005) has devoted his life to following Ghandi’s path to helping the people once known as “untouchables,” whom he calls—in quote marks-- “scavengers.” As a boy he had been taught not to touch such people. And as a brazen boy might do, one day he defied the commandment and touched such a woman to see what would happen. The reaction by his grandmother was loud and outraged. He needed to be purified. Religion mandated so. Washing himself and eating two small animal dung pellets were part of the cleansing ritual.

 But the “scavengers” were not the only one’s carrying germs on a regular basis that needed purification. Religious mandates specified the left hand as the dirty hand and the right hand as sacred for Hindus and Muslims. Having no toilet paper, many Hindus and Muslims wipe themselves with the left hand. The right hand is used for eating and caring for elders; it is considered “sacred,” while the left hand is considered to be tainted with “impurity,” and some groups believe that washing the hands together is sacrilegious, as the left hand will contaminate the right, (Parajuli,et al, 2009, p. 103). But before we allow cultural arrogance to seep into our thinking, note that,

According to a study led by Borchgrevink [an associate professor at MSU, who conducted a study of over 3,700 people in Michigan] only 5% of people washed their hands enough to kill infection and illness causing germs after using the bathroom. To make matters worse, 33% of hand washers didn't use soap, and 10% skipped the hygienic step altogether. (Friedman, 2013, n.p.)

Cultural shock and judgment of another’s culture should be balanced with cultural sensitivity, humility and self-reflexivity concerning one’s own culture in comparison to another. This recognition will help extend empathy to the culture in question.

Reserving cultural judgments may allow for an extended view to be explored. For instance, in the above mentioned study, American men were the worst offenders, demonstrating what the researchers deemed a stubborn rejection of washing and a justification for not washing that was just plain erroneous. So far, in our study, Indian men have reported that they do not wish to change their habits surrounding open defecation. They tell us that they have, after all, been doing it this way since “the beginning!”

 Researchers should not be too quick to dismiss the Indian’s men’s point that their traditional ways of defecating are fine or assume that their reasoning is based in ignorance. They have been taught to defecate far from home, this practice would keep feces away from living quarters and from cooking. Furthermore, it would generally keep feces away from the water sources, unless the groundwater is contaminated. The idea of defecating *in* one’s home, as westerners do, is perceived as troubling. Rural Indian men and women in our study also said of whatever plan we might propose we should not use too much water nor should we take the excrement too far away. At first I did not think to ask why.

Cultural Inquiry

Many comments or stories need to be questioned further. Inquisitiveness should be a standard part of extended narrative empathy. But being culturally sensitive is crucial. Question politely, or inquire discreetly before posing questions of a sensitive nature. This may include dialogue as in the CCA approach or the researcher may draw from other sources. The following stories exemplify cultural inquiry.

Cultural Inquiry and the Contemporary-Economic Narrative

A young Indian woman gave advice on this project early on and she told me a story of an elderly woman who worked for her family in India. The woman had no toilet of her own and so when she left her employer’s home she would go to the railroad tracks to defecate. I asked, why the railroad tracks? The young woman told me that many poor people defecate at the railroad tracks because they are washed down. I assumed that they were washed so that no larger obstacles would interfere with the running of the train. I was wrong. I should have questioned more but I did not want to seem like an overly and insatiably curious child asking why?...why?...why? In addition, the young woman’s story ended in the following way: One day the woman went to the railroad tracks to defecate, and whether she didn’t hear the train or couldn’t move quickly enough, she was struck and killed by the train. It would have been inappropriate to question further at that time. The young woman was heart-sick over the elder woman’s death. But interrogating is important to learning more about the narrative situation. I returned to the literature. It would seem, in India, the trains have toilet facilities for travelers, but they are often open hole toilets—there are seats, but the feces drop down onto the tracks. Although attempts are being made to rectify this situation, “50,000” train-coaches still dump excrement as they go. This is why the train tracks are washed. Former “Development Minister Jairam Ramesh has proposed projects worth $130 million to rid India of the scourge of open defecation and clean up a rail system he described as the world's "largest open toilet"” (Indian rail, 2012). Asking why or interrogating the narrative will help to extend the story.

Cultural Inquiry and the Contemporary-Ecological Narrative

With respect to the people of rural India who told us not to use too much water nor to take the excrement too far away. We learned that the area suffers from serious droughts during part of the year. Water is precious and should not be wasted in washing feces away. With regard to why it should not be taken too far away, usually the feces are left in the field to fertilize the local area. In addition, cow dung is collected in the same area. The pucks are gathered into stacks, much as Americans might stack wood for their fireplaces, to be used in cooking fires. Ecological decisions have been carefully considered by the Dalits.

 Understanding the Role of Aesthetics and Everyday Rituals

There is great beauty in every culture. Rural Dalit women and men enjoy the walk in the morning to the fields where they will relieve themselves. Women go together and talk of social issues as well as complain about their husbands. This good-natured complaining or gossip is an enjoyable part of the morning ritual. Men report that they enjoy walking in the morning and checking on their fields. In addition, they can, under the current practice, defecate in the field under open skies with a nice breeze to take the odor away, but if latrines are brought in as they have been in the past, the people are expected to enter dark, cubicles with almost no ventilation to “do their business.” The girls have bathrooms at school and have reported that they appreciate them, but miss the walk to the fields where they could pick berries and eat them on their way. There are no berry bushes on the way to school. Any intervention must consider the aesthetics of culture.

Overlapping Reasons, Aesthetic, Social and Economic as Rationales

So far, in our study, Indian men have reported that they do not wish to change their habits surrounding open defecation. They tell us that they have, after all, been doing it this way since “the beginning!” They do however also tell us that they recognize the social desire of women and girls to have privacy, but most importantly, they mention the subsidy that the government will pay if they construct toilets in their homes. And since the government is mandating such changes they might accept the installation of toilets based on women’s needs and economic inducements. Here the financial inducement gets the men to consider allowing toilets to be brought in, but they are unlikely to use them. Older women in our study have suggested that they are resigned to the way things are. They do not think we can invent a better way that overcomes all of the obstacles. Young women, however, tell us they want privacy.

In brief, extended narrative empathy allowed us to expand the narratives in multiple directions without succumbing to a collective narrative. It allowed us to understand what first appeared as contrasting perspectives, it allowed us to see our own cultural prejudices, it insisted that we question further, and allowed us to explore in an interdisciplinary way, including narratives of history, economics, politics, religion, cultural rituals, gender issues, ecological issues and aesthetics.

Conclusion

Each narrative led us down another path. Each one expanding our empathy, but also revealing a complicated problem. The extended narrative empathy approach may leave some feeling defeated with too many obstacles to overcome, but we believe otherwise. We believe achieving extended empathy in multiple directions will allow us to overcome myopic thinking and thus encourage us to take the next step in listening to the next narrative. If we do not extend our stories, we will likely offer limited solutions. Like the hasty decision to send port-a-potties. Even the more carefully considered eco-toilets deserve further review in light of extended narrative empathy. For example, although Pathak’s (2005) double pit toilet is designed to flush with just one cup of water, it is still designed to send the excrement far away, which would leave the Dalit with no local fertilizer for their fields.

Thus further questioning and listening is crucial to understanding and providing culturally sensitive solutions to grand global challenges such as open defecation. As Condit (1993) noted:

The empathic critic’s final role is to locate pieces of common ground among various voices and to discover options for those compromises necessary for co-existence. This critical approach places the scholar in a distinctive position. The scholar, as a skilled empath, is responsible for finding options that maximize multiple values and interests….A good empath will discover good options, and will help others to see those as good options, but ultimately, the parties or the people must and will decide. The critic is at most a creative facilitator who draws deeply on all of her or his intellectual, emotional, and literary skills in order to get all parties to understand each other more genuinely and to negotiate in good faith rather than in righteous self-interest. The empathic critic has no special expert knowledge of the case, but merely the ability to listen carefully to all voices, and to seek to draw them toward shared ground. The empathic critic is also not a stand-in for members of marginalized groups. If the discourse of mediation replaced voices rather than engaging with them, it would, indeed, become merely another ruse for silencing the weak. (p. 189)

Extended narrative empathy is not meant to send researchers and activist into a defeatist mental state by way of the preponderance of problems it may seem to reveal; rather, it is meant to send them on a narrative journey of unfolding stories that will lead to greater understanding and empathy. It is meant to encourage listening, reflexivity, inquiry, cultural humility and expansive empathy so that culturally-centered and imaginative solutions can be offered.

Cultural interventions deserve serious attention, as well as informed and sensitive solutions, especially in health matters. The culture-centered approach is one way to begin such an undertaking. Furthermore, adding extended narrative empathy can further enlighten researchers and participants. Extended narrative empathy is a theoretical and methodological approach to engaging with serious cultural challenges. The theory suggests that life be viewed as unfolding narratives which are connected in complex ways. The theory encourages researchers to take in as many perspectives as possible and in an empathetic way. An empathetic way means relinquishing cultural loyalties temporarily by becoming culturally humble, thus enabling listening to the other culture’s narratives without asserting cultural competence or arrogance. It asks us to empathize with the protagonist but not to stop there. By invoking an extended narrative empathy methodology, the researcher reaches out for additional narratives through collecting related narratives, identifying with the protagonist, inverting the protagonist for the antagonist in the story, seeking out historical, religious, political, economic, ecological and aesthetic narratives, seeking deeper understanding through inquiry, and being reflexive and empathic researchers. All of which should help researchers get closer to the “whole story.”

Even still, the extended narrative empathy approach will have limitations.

The limitlessness, the unboundedness of the multiple stories, means that researchers may feel the weight of the infinite number of narrative perspectives that can be uncovered. And like other qualitative approaches researchers will have to grapple with when they have enough stories to assume sufficient saturation. Future studies should deal with these concerns.

Daunting as these obstacle may be, we encourage researchers to take up an extended narrative empathy approach as we believe both those on the research end and those targets of intervention (and others in between) will find themselves learning a great deal more about themselves, their culture and others’ culture. The extended narrative empathy approach promises more efficient, effective and culturally-sensitive solutions to be proposed concerning the grand global challenges the world faces today.

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