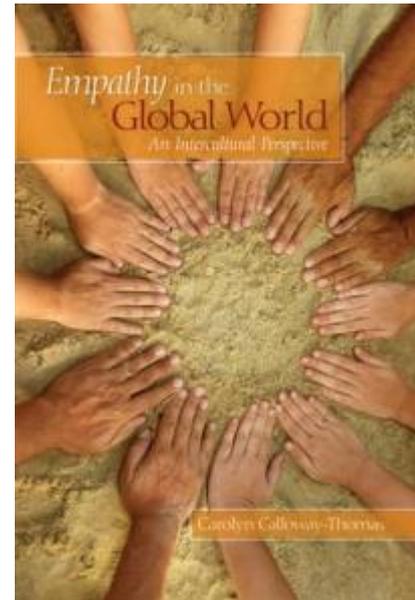


Book reviews

Reviewer Patrick Schmidt, SIETAR member
Author Carolyn Calloway-Thomas
Title Empathy in the Global World:
An Intercultural Perspective
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As any good trainer knows, empathy is deeply embedded in, and inseparable from, intercultural sensitivity. And it's no surprise that an increasing number of books on the subject have been published in recent years. But *Empathy in the Global World* goes beyond the usual examination of "the cultural other" by touching on geopolitics, class issues, international NGOs and national disasters. Simply put, it's an excellent distillation of the historical, political and psychological aspects of empathy.

The first two chapters provide some fascinating background. We learn, for instance, that the Roman philosopher Cicero (106-43 B.C.) warned "the whole foundation of the human community is threatened by treating foreigners worse than fellow Romans." And Immanuel Kant noted in the 18th century that "respect for dignity is owed to all humans regardless of their standing in the community."

His Scottish contemporary David Hume developed the idea of *concentric circles of empathy*, meaning people are loyal to their family first, then their village, region and nation in diminishing degrees. But as the world has continued to evolve, the concept has been turned on its head.

Given our modern, media-consumption lifestyle, we often find ourselves identifying with people in the outermost circles. Virtually everyone on the planet with access to television or the Internet was horrified as the twin towers of the World Trade Center cast up their columns of smoke on Sept 11th, 2001. When they finally collapsed, horror was transformed into a sense of profound sadness--somehow personally felt--among hundreds of millions of people around the world.

Conversely, as Chapter 4 points out, globalization is changing our attitudes toward empathy in another way. The latter half of the 20th century saw most educated Westerners embrace cultural

openness and, especially, generosity toward the downtrodden of the Third World. But the shock of 9/11 and subsequent train and subway bombings in Madrid and London have led--as terrorism is wont to do--to a pervasive atmosphere of suspicion and fear of "the cultural other".

Additionally, massive immigration coupled with high birth-rates among minority cultures has generated permanent demographic changes in both North America and Western Europe. Calloway-Thomas points out that when numerical balance poses a threat to indigenous society, empathy takes a back seat to national identity.

The fear of "foreign" ideas, customs and traditions is undoing our recent ways of thinking and feeling...even when the "foreigners" in question are second- or third-generation citizens. The hispanization of US culture and rioting by Muslim youth in Paris are both examples of long-term failures in integration. At the same time, death threats to those responsible for publishing cartoons of the prophet Mohammad in Denmark and the murder of Dutch film-director Theo van Gogh create even more of a backlash.

Chapters 5 and 6 show the enormous power media has on empathy by "framing" our understanding of the world. The author explores how the portrayal of subjects such as the Iraq War, Hurricane Katrina and poverty in Africa has unexpected consequences for our perceptions and behavior.

All this provides the groundwork for her concluding chapters on how we, as global citizens, can develop knowledge and information-based skills--or *empathetic literacy*--to better respond to cross-cultural encounters. "Ten Basic Rules of Intercultural Relations" is an excellent summary and can be used in any workshop.

All in all, the work is a goldmine of information for students, professors, trainers and even politicians searching for new ways to understand and address human problems on a global scale. Unfortunately, it has one weakness: at times, it reads like a term paper in its first draft. The author also cites every source of information (up to ten per page), seriously interrupting the flow of text. One talented editor, however, could sculpt this book into a gem on the nature and practices of intercultural empathy.