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Chapter Title: Empathy, Psychic Unity, Anger, and Shame: Learning about Personhood in a Remote Aboriginal Community

Chapter Author(s): VICTORIA K. BURBANK

Book Title: People and Change in Indigenous Australia

Book Editor(s): Diane Austin-Broos and Francesca Merlan

Published by: University of Hawai'i Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvvn58q.12>

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AFTERWORD

Empathy, Psychic Unity, Anger, and Shame

Learning about Personhood in a Remote Aboriginal Community

VICTORIA K. BURBANK

Some years ago, the eminent anthropologist Clifford Geertz ridiculed the idea that anthropological understanding was a product of empathy, in his words, an “extraordinary sensibility, an almost preternatural capacity to think, feel, and perceive like a native” (1974, 27). But this sensibility is precisely not just what anthropologists have but what most humans have, though it is more ordinary than “extraordinary.” Indeed, recently “empathy” has been seen as merely another way that some of us have of talking about a generic human ability to read the behavior of our conspecifics, an ability that we share with many other animals but that in our case is vastly elaborated, probably because of the additional development of our prefrontal cortex (Gallese 2005; Preston and de Waal 2002; Schulte-Rüther et al. 2007). This social sensitivity, in turn, is seen as a consequence of being a social species, especially a highly cooperative one, where the necessity to cooperate, along with a need to defend oneself against exploitation, requires a creature to be acutely attuned to its social environment (Hammerstein 2003; Worthman 2009). Ironically, it is just such a capacity that renders Geertz’s work so compelling. Take, for example, his discussion in the very paper where he dismisses empathy as an anthropological tool. Among culturally specific concepts of the person he includes those of the Javanese. Their idea of self incorporates an inside/outside dichotomy, *batin* and *lair*, which Geertz translates as “subjective feeling” on the one hand “perceived directly in all its phenomenological immediacy” and, on the other, from “external actions, movements, postures, speech” (Geertz 1974, 33). Without the capacity to imagine or understand the interior experience of another in light of one’s own, applying terms such as “subjective feeling” and “phenomenological immediacy” to any other human being would simply not make sense; it would be a nonsensical act, and the words meaningless when applied to anyone other than the self.

Whether or not empathy is a useful research tool has been a long-standing topic of debate in anthropological circles (e.g., Geertz 1974; Hollan and Throop 2008; Lutz 1988). No doubt part of the disagreement over this human capacity—seemingly active from our early days of life (Preston and de Waal 2002)—is due to different understandings of just what it is. It seems, says Mark Davis (2004), that every student of “empathy” has devised a different definition of it, and Simon Baron-Cohen (2011, 28) tells us “that there is a consensus in neuroscience that at least ten interconnected brain regions are involved in empathy,” suggesting that, while most of us have a gut certainty about what empathy is, this is a complicated domain of human experience about which we do not yet know a great deal. All appear to agree, however, that “empathy in some way involves the transformation of the observed experiences of another person into a response within the self” (Davis 2004, 19–20). Though we are yet to understand empathy as thoroughly as we someday might, surely its utility for our species, as well as for anthropology, rests in some form of shared nature, what we might call “psychic unity.”

Psychic unity is a thought some of us like to think. It helps us disavow racist interpretations of human difference and justifies comparison, which though no longer in fashion may be a necessary part of work we continue to do (Whitehead 1981). Yet even the most ardent believer in psychic unity must acknowledge the contradictions it entails and the complications these pose for anthropological understanding. One recent attack on the concept comes from philosopher David Buller, who dismantles John Tooby and Leda Cosmides’s (1992) argument that our “species-typical collection of complex psychological adaptations” “constitutes a universal human nature” by pointing out two things: first, that psychological mechanisms are phenotypic characteristics that must develop in each new individual; and second, that variation in human psychological phenotypes is apparent and may even be adaptive (Buller 2005, 9, 112, 423). Still, I am greatly attached to the idea of psychic unity; indeed, I do not think I could be an anthropologist without it. I accept the argument that Buller and others, such as Shore (1996) and Ingold (2004), make that there is no mind without development and hence we must expect diversity rather than uniformity in human nature. Yet I feel uncomfortable with the idea that there are no shared aspects of human nature, though Buller’s insistence that this diversity is found on an individual rather than a population basis has somewhat lessened my concerns. I have, nevertheless, found myself on a quest to find at least some of the constants of human development that can provide us with a basis for expecting shared experience, and hence shared components or processes of mind.

It is in the human form and function that I think my quest most likely to be fruitful. Now I know that variation characterizes even our species’s typical form. In a small percentage of the human population, for example, the heart is located on the right rather than the left side of the body (Abbott and Meakins 1915).

Still, anatomists are unlikely to teach aspiring doctors that the heart's location is uncertain; yes, there is variation, but it is highly constrained.

Anthropologists long before me have looked to the body as an entrée into the minds and cultures of other people. Michael Jackson (1983), for example—inspired by both Marcel Mauss's introduction of "habitus" into the anthropological lexicon and by Maurice Merleau-Ponty's observation that "consciousness is in the first place not a matter of 'I think that' but of 'I can'" (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 137; in Jackson 1983, 327)—experienced his participation in the activities of the Kuranko as a means of "literally putting oneself in the place of another person." This helped him to "grasp the sense of an activity" (Jackson 1983, 340) to conclude that "bodiliness unites and forms the grounds of an empathic, even universal, understanding" (Jackson 1983, 341). Attending less to the classic French concern with bodily practice and more to an American-bred cognitive anthropology, Maurice Bloch (1991), as a second example, sees participant observation as the means of transforming implicit knowledge into the written word, for it provides access to unspoken, indeed nonlinguistic, concepts and activities of daily life that necessarily exist tacitly, for reasons of efficiency. Mauss, Jackson, and Bloch all draw upon "bodiliness," and of course we can add Bourdieu (1977) to this list. However, they do so largely as a means of identifying and understanding cultural difference. I, on the other hand, turn to the body as a source of what we may all share.

Linguist George Lakoff and philosopher Mark Johnson, also inspired by Merleau-Ponty, see bodily experience as the foundation of pan-human, not culturally specific, perception and understanding. This is not to say that bodies cannot be used to discover the culturally specific, but rather that they can also be used to bridge it, to find the shared elements in human experience. Lakoff and Johnson argue that as human bodies (which include brains) interact with the world, these experiences are instantiated as primary metaphors—that is, as neural structures, sometimes referred to as schemas at the psychological level—that represent this experience and enable us to understand subsequent experience. To the extent that these experiences are shared by all humanity, these metaphors are universals, which are, nevertheless, not "hard wired" but learned, arising from the existential constants of human lives (Lakoff and Johnson 1999, 56–57). An example of a primary metaphor is: *intimacy is closeness*. The subjective experience of what Lakoff and Johnson call "intimacy"¹ arises from the sensorimotor experience of being physically close, for example, of being held. We can easily imagine this to be one of the earliest and most repeated experiences of our vulnerable and dependent infancy. It is metaphors such as this, embodied as mental schema, that enable us to apprehend and speak about our world. Hence, a Western anthropologist might say: "I am no longer close to my high school friends. We drifted apart long ago." And a speaker of Roper (or Ngukurr) Kriol or Aboriginal English might

distinguish “close” family from the larger kindred. Later in this chapter, I draw on this metaphor as a means of comprehending a felt threat to one Aboriginal woman’s personhood.

For decades now anthropologists have recognized that “persons” are cultural creations requiring ethnographic interpretation of what being a certain kind of person means (e.g., Myers 1979; Marcus and Fischer 1986). I delineate personhood as those aspects of the self that are recognized by the community and are accepted in the sense of being expected of a “person,” whether they are valued or devalued qualities, and argue that challenges to one’s personhood may in some, if not all, settings be a distressing experience. I focus on just one facet of a posited personhood at Numbulwar: the expectation that a person is someone who may ask for and expect to receive things from close kin.

Numbulwar

Commencing in 1952 as the Rose River Mission that was established and run by the Anglican Church Missionary Society, Numbulwar today is what is called a “remote” Aboriginal community located in the southeastern part of the Arnhem Land Reserve. “Remote” generally refers to the fact that a community is inhabited by indigenous people in an isolated part of the continent and maintained largely by government funding and local desire, if not need, to reside there. During the years 2003–2005 of my most recent study, one on inequality and psychosocial stress, Numbulwar’s population of between eight hundred to one thousand people fluctuated as people moved between this “town” and other remote communities in the area. The language group most strongly identified with Numbulwar, as has always been the case, was that of the Nunggubuyu; but people who speak, or whose ancestors once spoke, languages from nearby areas such as Anindiljaugwa, Mara, Ngandi, Ritharngu, and Wandarang, were integrated into the life of the town, often through marriage with Nunggubuyu people. Hunting and gathering still occupied some but did not support the population, and most of the Aboriginal people living there received various forms of welfare as there were few employment opportunities in the town. While, at least in name, governance of local affairs had passed in the 1970s to an Aboriginal Council made up of representatives of the local clans,² it was assisted by a town clerk recruited from outside the community and overseen by various territory and federal bodies. Like the town clerk, Numbulwar’s teachers, doctors, nurses, and directors of the various structures and programs that sustained it were, with few exceptions, “whitefellas.”

The environment in which Aboriginal “family” found themselves during these years, is one that included an ever-increasing number and kind of material goods—goods, at least initially, entrained by the whitefella presence, goods over which family members may have felt the need to compete. This is an environment

that likely contributed to, if it did not instigate, an increasing number of experiences of being, if only briefly, a nonperson vis-à-vis other family members. However, while the Aboriginal people of Numbulwar were confronted on a daily basis by one kind of Western institution or another and the stresses these might bring, life's security, significance, buffers, and rewards were derived, in large part, from immersion in "family" (Burbank 2006), that is, "a kindred," "an egocentrically defined field of close kin" (Shapiro 1981, 41).

Shame, Anger, Family

Some years ago, Lila Abu-Lughod and Catherine Lutz directed anthropological attention to emotion discourse, often manifest as "emotion talk" (1990, 2), that is, talk about emotions and talk that includes "emotional" content. Although they disavowed a denial of "non-linguistic 'realities'" (ibid., 13), in keeping with the time, their treatment of emotion was phrased very much in terms of a stark nature/nurture dichotomy, with the prescription that "emotion talk must be interpreted as in and about social life *rather than* as veridically referential to some internal state" (ibid., 11; my italics), a position that has subsequently been substantially and, I believe, persuasively rebutted (e.g., Hinton 1999; W. Reddy 1997, 2001). Nevertheless, their advocacy of "emotion talk" as a research focus has provided me with a valuable approach to understanding something of other people's lives, selves, and here, personhood. Conversations, whether of the formal or informal kind, are my way of approaching local experiences; listening to "emotion talk" is, I believe, an entrée to understanding experiences of, among other things, aspects of the self that are expected and accepted by the larger community.

The following is an extract from the journals I kept in 2004 during a visit to Numbulwar. It is my best attempt to re-create an informal conversation with someone I pseudonymously call Penny, an Aboriginal woman in her thirties whom I have known since she was a child of four or five. In 2007, I visited Numbulwar to present the preliminary results of my fieldwork on the 2003–2005 study to the local council and to many of the individuals who had participated in it. I also used this trip as an opportunity to ask for permission to use material such as this in publications. All but Penny's name have been replaced with kin statuses in what follows.

[Penny] tells me [her sister] got her "bonus money today, three thousand dollars." And she gave two hundred dollars to [her eldest brother] and she gave to [her eldest sister and her daughter] and to her [mother's sister's daughter and her daughter and son]. When [Penny] asked her for fifty dollars for [her son] to buy a toy car from the shop, she said she didn't have any money. "She made me upset. When I asked her she got angry and made me shame." Q: Why didn't she give you something? A: "She's greedy,

she's going selfish now. She didn't give me or [a third sister]." Asks if I have [her mother's] number in town. She's going to call and tell her that [her sister] didn't give anything [to the third sister]. "She always come to me asking me for sugar, for Rinso [laundry soap]. I told her, 'Don't give that fifty dollars to me. If you give me fifty dollars, I'll burn it with a lighter.' She gave it to [my husband]. I told her not to come to my house. She made me feel upset." (Burbank 2011,102)

Now what first strikes me about this extract is its emotional intensity. "Upset" is a term that appears to be used as a synonym for "angry" in the Aboriginal English that Penny is speaking here. I think any reader of this scenario can imagine that being left out of a family distribution of cash might make anyone feel "upset." But according to her "emotion talk," Penny also felt "shame," an emotion that has been described as "the most powerful emotion in Aboriginal life" (Bauman 2002, 213). Penny may not be the only person in Numbulwar to express both shame and anger more or less simultaneously. For example, "[A man strikes the office with an axe] because he is shame of what he did to his wife [in a fight]. He is shame because [her parents] growl at him and he is not going to have their girl again, and he was very angry and got an axe and cut the shop" (Burbank 1994, 85).

Using the words "shame" and "upset" at least hints at the extent to which this interaction was important to Penny.

When people in Numbulwar are speaking about "shame," they will often say, even in the same sentence, something like "he was feeling shame, shy." When one is feeling shame one does not want to see other people. For example: "Maybe a man got married to another girl and that young girl really loved him, that makes her shame. She won't ever cut across his pathway, she will never want to see him. She will be shy" (Burbank 1988, 92). When someone is feeling "shame," they not only don't want to see people, they don't want people to see them: "When somebody, two [in-laws], have a fight and one stares at each other and says, 'I don't call you [in-law].' And makes other people feel shame. 'Why does she have to say that,' people say. . . . They stay at home and maybe two or three days stay inside and come out when they don't feel shame anymore" (Burbank 1994, 85). As is indicated in Penny's account by her stated threat to burn any bill that might be proffered, shame also clearly includes an aggressive component, as the example of the man striking the office with an axe demonstrates. In that quotation, the speaker even appears to be using "angry" and "shame" as synonyms.

We must also pay attention to the fact that this incident took place between close family members. Families in the cognate community of Ngukurr have been described as "a source of stress as well as comfort" by Kate Senior (2003, 138), a medical anthropologist who has worked there since 1998. Family at Numbulwar, as in other parts of the world, is a complex social arena composed of competing and cooperative interests and, I have found, one in which a range of emotions are

both felt and expressed, often in dramatic ways. Early childcare practice may be fairly described as highly nurturing and responsive, and a community-wide expectation that infants and small children are to be cherished and protected is usually manifest in adults' behavior, whether this is displayed in the rapid response to a crying child or in the, sometimes physical, fights provoked when a mother (or another parental figure) attacks another whose child has harmed one of her own. However, all children in Numbulwar are likely to have siblings, whether actual or the offspring of close family members. These age-mates are companions and playmates, but also competitors, who may on occasion become foes. It is no accident, I am sure, that family was the setting in which this event took place, eliciting Penny's feelings of shame and anger.

At Numbulwar, one is usually in close contact with and dependent on "family" throughout the life course. It is family that provides material, political, and emotional support, entertainment, and social security. But in an environment characterized by scarce resources, competition between family members can be rife. In particular, the practice of demand sharing, that is, of asking another, usually a close kinsperson, for something (Peterson 1993), may be growing increasingly stressful, for today there are many more things available to have and to ask for. This activity takes place in Numbulwar dozens, if not hundreds, of times a day within any given family. It is likely that Penny's sister gave money to her older brother, older sister, and classificatory "sister" because they had asked her for it. Penny's request just happened to come after theirs.

Underpinning "demand sharing" is an egalitarian ethos and an expectation of reciprocity not unanticipated in a group of recent hunter-gatherers (Peterson 1993; Woodburn 2005). The expectation of reciprocity, however, is not always one of joyous anticipation; "square back" may be as much for an act of refusal or aggression as for an act of generosity. Having been refused by her sister, Penny, in turn, refuses her sister's money when it is finally offered, and having felt set apart from "family," sets her sister apart from her, telling her to stay away from her house (Burbank 2011).

Speaking of the Pintupi of Central Australia, Fred Myers (1979) has described "shame" as a public emotion, that is, as an emotion one would speak of when referring to an interaction between two or more people who did not regard each other as close kin, for example, observed committing a faux pas by the community at large. He has also observed that Pintupi generally refrain from asking for something from people who are distant kin or strangers. When they do so, such a request might be prefaced by the words "I am ashamed." Even when in need, people might avoid asking for something because a refusal "would demolish the ideology of shared identity through kinship" (Myers 1979, 363). According to Nicolas Peterson (1993, 870), "demand sharing" is not simply a means of distributing resources; it is just as much a means of creating and maintaining relationships.

Hence Penny's distress, and she did indeed seem distressed when she told me about her sister's denial of her request. Not only was her request being denied, so was her relationship with her sister and her other siblings (see also Myers 1986a, 115). Given belief in the concept of "family" as essential to one's well-being, even minor refusals may be threatening. In this example, Penny's request for money was refused; but, more important, she was treated differently from others. Her sister's rejection set her apart from "family." She was, perhaps, if only momentarily, treated as not kin. And, as Myers (1979, 351) has observed of the Pintupi, non-kin in Numbulwar are essentially regarded as nonpersons—thus Penny's use of the word "shame" in her attempt to convey the meaning of this event to me and my interpretation of her emotion talk as an account, not merely of a family quarrel, but of a distressing experience. It is at this moment that we might understand Diane Eades's (1993, 188) assertion that Aboriginal "shame" is "like a mixture of embarrassment and fear." We might also better understand Penny's stated intention of calling her mother—something she may or may not have actually done—as a means of evoking a potent and positive symbol of her early, and perhaps also later, experiences of family in the form of a nurturing and protective parent (Burbank 2011).

Now how is it that we think we understand something of Penny's experience, not just her representation of it? On what basis do we understand her words "shame" and "upset"? This is a question anthropologists must ask, especially if we accept both Michael Reddy's proposition that meaning does not adhere in words but in minds (1979, in Linger 1994), which is to say that words do not convey meanings but evoke them, and Lakoff and Johnson's claim that "mental structures are meaningful by virtue of their connection to our bodies and our embodied experiences. They cannot be characterized by meaningless symbols" (1999, 77). This is where we return to empathy and psychic unity. What makes much of Penny's account and the preceding analysis meaningful to us, or so I argue, is our past bodily experience of being physically close and the subjective experience of "intimacy" that is neurally instantiated as the primary metaphor: *Intimacy is closeness*. We not only hear Penny's words describing her emotions, we see how close she is to her family and we see her separation from her "close" family. Recall Penny's words towards the end of the excerpt: "She always *come* to me asking me for sugar, for Rinso. I told her, '*Don't give that fifty dollars to me. If you give me fifty dollars, I'll burn it with a lighter.*' She gave it to [my husband]. I told her *not to come to my house*. She made me feel upset."

What we can see here, clearly, is how relationships are understood metaphorically as well as emotionally. For people in Numbulwar, shame is distancing, as I believe it is for most westerners if not most other people. I remind you of how others in Numbulwar talk about shame:

“He is shame because [her parents] growl at him and he is not going to have their girl again [that is, he will be *separated* from her].”

“She *won't ever cut across his pathway*, she will *never want to see him*.”

“They *stay at home* and maybe two or three days *stay inside* and come out when they don't feel shame any more.”

When things in the family are going as they should, Penny's sister “come to me”—that is, comes close to her. But after her sister's refusal of her request and, in a sense, repudiation of their relationship, Penny “told her not to come to my house” and “Don't give that fifty dollars to me. If you give me fifty dollars, I'll burn it with a lighter.” That is, she told her sister to keep her distance, she doesn't want her in her house or close enough to hand her a fifty-dollar bill. While she is feeling shamed and upset, she rejects the emotional closeness associated with the physical closeness of family. At the same time she seeks the closeness of her mother, albeit this is only the virtual closeness of a possibly imagined telephone call. Shame in particular is distance, and distance is the opposite of intimacy, emotional distance. Thus, because we understand that physical closeness is intimacy and that physical distance is its opposite, because we can feel physical closeness and we can feel physical separation, we understand at least some of what Penny is trying to tell us about her shame, and hence about herself in that interaction, what it feels like and means to her. In this instance it means she is not being treated as close kin, and hence as a person.

Empathy, however, can cause us problems of understanding too. We do need to heed Geertz's warning that “the anthropologist who presumes she is being ‘empathetic’ is merely projecting her own thoughts and feelings onto the unsuspecting subjects of study, thereby mischaracterizing them in the process” (Hollan and Throop 2008, 388). Primary metaphors may ground our empathetic response, but they do not remain in isolation. Zoltan Kövecses (2005, 287) has suggested that primary metaphors interact with sociocultural experience and are affected by experiential foci, that is, by the elements of an experience to which we choose to pay attention, something very likely to be directed by cultural values. For example, we may assume with some assurance that all humans feel both a rise in blood pressure and body temperature along with anger-like emotions. Working cross-culturally, comparative linguists have found that metaphors for anger often draw upon experiences of both pressure and heat, as in “He needs to blow off some steam.” In China, however, anger is usually conceptualized metaphorically only in terms of pressure; for some, likely sociocultural, reason, the experience of heat is largely ignored (Kövecses 2005, 247). And on Ifaluk the body is ignored altogether in the conceptualization of *song*, an anger-like emotion (Kövecses 2005, 287).

Given an ethnographic goal of understanding as much as possible of others' experience, we must guard against unreflective projection. Our capacity to imagine

the intentions, feelings, and perspectives of others does not guarantee that we are right. As Laurence Kirmayer has observed: “As soon as one has an emotional response (empathic or otherwise) it is caught up in one’s own inner dynamics of identity and emotion, eliciting countervailing feelings and reactions that may intensify, change, or eliminate the original empathic response. Thus empathy further requires regulation of one’s own idiosyncratic associations to stay on track with those most pertinent to mirroring the other” (Kirmayer 2008, 460).

Ethnographic research based on prolonged field stays is a necessary complement to our empathic capacity to understand others (Kirmayer 2008); the closer our experience is to that of the people we are trying to understand, the less likely we are to be entirely off the mark (Preston and de Waal 2002). In the example I have given, we need to know not so much about our own family history but about Penny’s family and the importance of family at Numbulwar, as well as in remote Aboriginal Australia more generally. We need to know how ubiquitous acts of demand sharing are in everyday life and how they, along with family, are positioned in a hierarchy of value that places relationships above possessions (Burbank 2011, 2014). Given the ongoing “changes relevant to the lives and being and the variable circumstance of Australian indigenous communities” (see Austin-Broos and Merlan, Introduction, this volume, 1), sustained, in-depth field studies are clearly vital for a robust ethnography of Aboriginal Australia.

The primary metaphor *Intimacy is closeness* is a vital component of our understanding of Penny’s experience, but equally vital is our knowledge that “close family” are entitled to ask each other for things and may expect them to be given when they do so, as expressions of anger and acts of aggression make very clear when they are not. If Myers’s (1979, 363) observation that a refusal of a request “would demolish the ideology of shared identity through kinship” may be generalized to this case, Penny’s sister’s denial of her request, and, momentarily, of their close relationship, was also a denial of Penny’s personhood. She was, in that instant, not someone who could ask her kin for something and receive it—a someone, perhaps, paradigmatic of the Aboriginal “person” in contemporary remote community Australia. Seeing this, we are able to understand that the feeling of shame, however brief, is a response to the denial of one’s personhood and so can better grasp how fear may enter into it, as Eades (1993) has suggested. For what could be more threatening to a person whose existence is so clearly predicated on family acceptance?

The knowledge of others with which empathy provides us is always imperfect and may be especially so in cross-cultural settings. Still, knowing what we are beginning to know about human sociality and social intelligence, it is not surprising that humans have invented ethnography and have been able to learn something of the experiences that make up the personhood of others.

Acknowledgments

I thank the people of Numbulwar; their willingness to share their words and lives with me is a priceless gift. The principal body of work drawn upon for this essay was supported by an Australian Research Council Discovery Grant (no. DP0210203) received with Robert Tonkinson and Myrna Tonkinson and titled “Inequality, Identity and Future Discounting: A Comparative Ethnographic Approach to Social Trauma.” Many thanks to Katie Glaskin, Yasmine Musharbash, and Myrna Tonkinson for their insightful suggestions on earlier versions of this essay. I am grateful to Diane Austin-Broos and Francesca Merlan for inviting me to participate in the panel “Re-thinking Personhood: In Anthropology, and in Indigenous Australia,” which spurred me on to write this chapter.

Notes

1. We must recognize this label as a culturally specific one that might be better translated, but I shall work with it in this chapter.
2. “Clan” is what most people at Numbulwar call named groups associated with specific “country” via patrilineation.

