

# A Lacanian Critique of the Empathy Cure: Jouissance, Extimacy, and Hating thy Neighbor

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The cultivation of more and better empathy has become a popular solution to the social problems of violence and xenophobia. Recent self-help books promise to teach us how, via empathy, we can reduce misunderstandings and conflicts so that we may love our racially or religiously different neighbors as ourselves—while at the same time competing with them in our neoliberal age. Psychology as a field has championed the benefits of empathy, devoting much research to the topic. Employing Lacanian psychoanalytic theory in the practice of critical psychology allows us to understand when and why empathy fails as a proposed curative factor in social efforts to reduce hostility toward others. For instance, hatred can be seen as a passion from which we derive jouissance, rendering it difficult to relinquish. Lacan's notion of the structure of subjectivity along with jouissance, extimacy, and the capitalist and master's discourses will be employed in this paper to critique psychology's view of empathy.

**KEYWORDS**

empathy, neoliberalism, psychoanalysis, Lacan, xenophobia, racism

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Barack Obama, both in his time as a U.S. senator and as a president, voiced his concern not about the federal deficit but about our empathy deficit, which he saw as a bigger problem. In a commencement speech in 2006, referencing “the child who’s hungry, the laid-off steelworker, the immigrant woman cleaning your dorm room” he claimed that “we live in a culture that discourages empathy” (Northwestern University, 2006). Obama, of course, is far from alone in recent decades in his suggestion that hostilities between groups regarding religion, race, gender, sexuality, and so on would be ameliorated if only we as a culture could cultivate more empathy (Batson, Lishner, & Stocks, 2015; Segal, 2007; Taylor & Glen, 2020; Trout, 2009; de Waal, 2010). What happens, however, when we are faced with an opportunity to empathize with someone in such an out-group, someone who elicits our hatred and fear?

Taking a Lacanian psychoanalytic perspective on subjectivity allows for an illuminating critique of psychology’s conceptions of empathy and the idea that empathy can cure our hatred of out-groups. This paper will unfold by focusing first on empathy in the age of neoliberalism before turning to a brief review of empathy within the field of psychology. Next, empathy will be discussed using Lacan’s imaginary and symbolic axes of experience. After that, empathy is argued to be shaped by our biases, including our xenophobic biases. Concluding thoughts will focus on *jouissance* and *extimacy*, although those concepts, as well as neoliberalism and Lacan’s discourse of the capitalist, will be utilized throughout this paper.

## 2 | EMPATHY & NEOLIBERALISM

Especially in recent decades, the field of psychology has generated a wealth of research regarding empathy, and empathy is considered to be the cornerstone of effective psychotherapy. This body of research has a reciprocal relation with society, such that there are a plethora of popular science and self-help books touting the benefits of empathy (e.g., Riess & Neporent, 2018; Stanley, 2012). What is more, empathy research seems to have surged since the dawn of neoliberalism. A search for the term “empathy” in Google Scholar between 1960 and 1980—toward the end of which we were beginning the age of neoliberalism—yielded only about 22,400 results, compared to about 179,000 from 1980-2000 and about 937,000 between 2000 and 2020. How can we understand this correlation between the rise in empathy studies and the rise of neoliberalism?

Via his various formulations on *extimacy* (e.g., Lacan, 1997b, p. 139), Lacan claimed that what is most intimate in the subject is necessarily linked with the Other. The way the subject takes up the exhortation to empathize is part and parcel of its situatedness in neoliberal discourses and at the same time the contradictory superegoic commandment to love thy neighbor as thyself. Correspondingly, there is a societal superegoic call to make better use of empathy so that we can, out of the kindness of our hearts, understand the neighbor who is different from us, and, if not love, at least achieve full tolerance of her or him. This dictate produces things like the book entitled *The Empathy Effect: Seven Neuroscience-Based Keys for Transforming the Way We Live, Love, Work, and Connect Across Differences* (Riess & Neporent, 2018), or one of the many self-help books promising to boost emotional intelligence, such as *Emotional Intelligence for Sales Success: Connect with Customers and Get Results* (Stanley, 2012).

In Lacan’s capitalist discourse (1978), the structural necessity of subjective division is denied through claims that there exists an S1 (a master signifier or a key word that takes on special significance for the subject), functioning in the place of truth, that answers the distress and dissatisfaction of the split subject (a term representing that the subject is split by language into conscious and unconscious processes, is lacking in *jouissance* or libidinal enjoyment, and is perpetually desiring). Capitalism in our age thus fabricates the belief that the subject’s discontents are not

inherent to the structure of subjectivity but instead simply due to having not yet obtained the right S1, the right product or experience that would enable a state of full subjective satisfaction. Capitalism, via its conduits such as advertising, finds ways to create demand for an S1, for example a product such as the newest Tesla sports car, so that subjects—defined as consumers under neoliberalism—assign to their suffering a lack that is perfectly complemented by that Tesla car. The internal logic here might be represented by the sentiment “If only I could make enough money to purchase that car, then I will have really made it; I’ll really be able to enjoy myself.” Capitalist discourse, then, promotes the semblance of dissatisfaction, emphasizing subjective discontents, at the same time that it fosters fantasies of self-sufficiency and completeness. As such, we can see that the subject under the sway of capitalist discourse can even relate to empathy products (such as the aforementioned books or empathy-building programs) as an S1. In an age whose dissatisfactions are described by many as isolation and disconnectedness on the one hand and xenophobia on the other, empathy is packaged as just the right social glue for the job. What is more, under neoliberalism, empathy is advertised attractively: by taking this seminar, purchasing this book, you will be more empathic than your fellow worker and therefore win the promotion over her or him. Empathy, then, is paradoxically both touted as a technique that will give you a cutting edge in your career *and*, at the same time, as the healing balm that soothes the aches and pains resulting from relating to your fellow worker as competition. Of course, because the field of psychology operates to generate knowledge about empathy, psychology fuels the ways in which empathy serves as a symptomatic S1 in neoliberal society. Despite the fact that empathy as a term has been commonplace in the human sciences since the late 19th century and is predated by the 18th century use of “sympathy” by the likes of David Hume and Adam Smith, it is perhaps no coincidence that empathy has risen to such heights of popularity only in recent decades.

### 3 | EMPATHY & THE FIELD OF PSYCHOLOGY

Although the term “empathy” was not introduced until the 19th century, in the 18th century the term “sympathy” was used by Adam Smith (2002) and David Hume (2011) in much the same way as empathy. The German word *Einfühlung*, which literally means “feeling into,” was originally used in aesthetics and psychology in the late 19th century (aesthetist Robert Vischer in 1873). Theodor Lipps used *Einfühlung* to explain both how people experience aesthetically and how they arrive at knowledge of others’ mental states. Since Lipps was the translator of the German translation of Hume’s *A Treatise of Human Nature*, he was certainly familiar with Hume’s work on sympathy. Edward Titchener, in his 1909 *Lectures on the Experimental Psychology of the Thought-Processes* (2015), introduced the term “empathy” into English, translating *Einfühlung* using a transliteration of the Greek *empathēia*. By this time, however, empathy as a concept had already gained prominence in a number of related fields and was considered a primary method in the human sciences.

In the majority of instances in which empathy is referred to as a solution for conflict or aggression, it is conflated in large part with caring, love, or kindness. Although academics who specialize in empathy are careful to differentiate it from love, there is no universally agreed-upon definition of empathy (Coplan & Goldie, 2011). Roughly speaking, empathy researchers tend to discuss two main types of empathy: emotional empathy, which means feeling what another person is feeling as *if you were that person*, and cognitive empathy, which means awareness of another’s thoughts and/or feelings or thinking what another person is thinking as *if you were that person* (*ibid.*). Despite researchers’ preference to preserve the scientific cleanliness of empathy as a concept, love cannot be so easily excised from empathy. After all, in order to go to the trouble of attempting to empathize with someone, you must have a motivation to do so, and that motivation is typically some vicissitude of love, be it friendship, positive regard, compassion, or—as we know well in the field of psychoanalysis—of hatred. And so we should not be so quick to

dismiss the layperson's understanding of empathy as intertwined with matters of love.

Turning to recent research in psychology which has focused on deploying empathy to combat stigma, laboratory studies have produced mixed results at best (Bloom, 2016) even though they utilize highly controlled situations and instruct participants to empathize with someone in a stigmatized group. To name but a few problems with the efficacy of empathy, research suggests that someone has to value the person in distress in order to be able to experience empathic concern for them (Batson et al., 2007), that empathic perspective-taking can result in more negative inter-group interactions when individuals are judged to be relatively low in prejudice (Vorauer et al., 2009; Vorauer & Sasaki, 2009), and that for those who are highly identified with their own group, taking the perspective of an out-group can lead them to make less favorable judgments about that out-group (Tarrant, Calitri, & Weston, 2012). Even if a psychological study manages to induce empathy for a member of a stigmatized group—and success in these instances is, of course, measured in terms of statistical significance rather than meaningful experiences—there are studies suggesting that the empathy fails to generalize to the group as a whole (Bloom, 2016; Gloor & Puhl, 2016). This finding is perhaps due to viewing the person in the study as an exception, or might be owing to what Paul Bloom (2016) has dubbed the “spotlight effect” in his argument that empathy operates by focusing on one target and that the more individuals that are added to the equation, the more diffuse and difficult empathizing becomes. What is more, some research suggests that as individuals are exposed again and again to empathy-relevant situations, empathy declines over time (Cheng et al., 2017). In psychology studies in natural settings, such as schools or workplaces, which use empathy training techniques in the hopes of reducing hostility toward another group, they are further limited because they cannot force participants to apply those empathy techniques when they are actually encountering someone from that other group. As with the psychology laboratory-based studies, the results are mixed at best (e.g., Clark, Robertson, & Young, 2019; Lai et al., 2017), casting a substantive shadow of doubt over the possibility of forcing people to empathize with the neighbor who differs from them.

Further consideration of methodologies used in psychology empathy research yields still more criticisms. When it comes to the application of empathy techniques for use in ameliorating social conflicts, the typical methodologies employed are the use of surveys or life outcome data. As an example of the latter, the effects of a new anti-bullying program (centered around empathy) on school children might be gleaned from comparing incident reports of bullying made before versus after the initiation of the program. As such, it is not possible to know in such instances whether or not the children even bothered to empathize with one another. This problem is not present, however, in laboratory research settings—operating as they do under the fantasy that such research is objective and somehow lacking in situatedness in ideology and subjective biases—in which the research task ensures that the participant make an effort at empathizing (as operationalized by the researchers). In laboratory research, a typical method involves presenting a subject with a written description of someone in a difficult situation, an audio recording of an actor describing her or his plight, or viewing a photograph of a person in an emotionally charged situation, instructing the subject to empathize with the fictionalized target individual, and then asking the subject to complete a survey that measures the degree of empathy they experienced (e.g., Batson et al., 2007; Chiu & Yeh, 2017). An empathic response on the part of the research subject is only considered as such if it is accurate, that is, if it matches the researchers' conception of what was experienced by the target. The target, of course, is to varying degrees constructed by the researchers themselves, and the target's experience simplified to one correct emotional experience.

In natural settings, individuals are far from always experiencing only one emotion or thought as they encounter situations in life, and thus *if* someone is motivated to try to empathize with another person or group, it can be challenging to arrive at accurate empathy for someone even if that person is in direct observation of a seemingly simple situation. Further, owing to the limits of our understanding, we can never truly and completely know what someone else is experiencing. As an example of the typical challenges that face us even when we are motivated to

empathize—as accurately as possible—imagine being at an important work meeting during which you witness the presenter realize that he has had toilet paper stuck to the bottom of his shoe. You might imagine, via emotional empathy, that he is surprised, dismayed, and embarrassed, and, via cognitive empathy, that he is worrying about negative judgments on this account from his colleagues. It could easily be the case, however, that the man was nonplussed or even amused, feeling a bit surprised but not at all embarrassed or dismayed, rendering your attempt at empathy a failure.

## 4 | LANGUAGE, THE IMAGINARY & THE SYMBOLIC

Although the more information you have about a particular person and how she encounters the world, the greater your potential to empathize with her (Coplan & Goldie, 2011), it remains a challenge to know what the target individual is experiencing with any certainty, even if you are able to ask that person. Speech is not like the fantasy of a Vulcan mind meld, somehow able to perfectly transmit someone else's experience. Even if someone does choose to share what she imagines to be the truth of her experience, it is a Lacanian truth that speech is not comprised of signs but rather of signifiers. This is to say that a word, or a signifier, does not function like a sign—such as a stop sign—that has a fixed meaning. There are many ways to interpret speech. What is more, we tend to interpret someone else's words—as well as their situation—from our own perspective, fitting them into our own understandings as it suits us in the moment. In Lacan's words, “the very foundation of interhuman discourse is misunderstanding” (1997a, p. 184). We can also see all communication as being miscommunication because we do not even know ourselves on account of our unconscious processes. Someone who tells us about her experience as she understands it might very well have repressed a related thought and have affects which have been transformed and/or displaced. It is not only the unconscious but Lacan's other conceptions of subjectivity that shed important light on the question of the operation of empathy in clinical work and in attempts to love our neighbor as ourselves.

Examining empathy through the notion of extimacy, for instance, illuminates a number of additional insights which assist in seeing why empathy so often fails to help us to love or to understand our neighbor. Extimacy demonstrates that there is something of the exterior, of the other as well as the Other (a Lacanian term referring to language, culture and cultural norms and values and also to someone who represents the Other such as a parent or authority figure), in the innermost kernel of ourselves as well as something intimate in the exterior. Although the term itself does not arise until Lacan's later teachings, we can retroactively find extimacy even in his earlier work with his oft-repeated assertion “*Le désir de l'homme, c'est le désir de l'Autre*” (Lacan, 1998, p. 38), because one of its interpretations is “Man's desire is the same as the Other's desire”. This has implications for the development of the ego via identifications with others as well as in shaping the subject of the unconscious and the fantasy relation. Later in Lacan's work he emphasizes *jouissance*, an embodied state of arousal, agitation, or enjoyment, and we also model our *jouissance* after the Other. Read at face value by someone unfamiliar with Lacan's work, these statements about the extimacy of subjectivity would seem to indicate that we are ideally suited to empathizing with the other, since our identities, behaviors, desire, and modes of *jouissance* are fashioned in accordance with others. What this leaves out is that the child's *interpretation* of others and of the Other together with the child's own preferences are what drives the formation of the subject via extimacy. There is no magical, automatic conduit to accurate empathy for the other.

The popularity and excitement concerning the operation of mirror neurons—since they function without any conscious effort—is reflective of such a desire, but mirror neurons are only able to achieve a *comparable*, and typically attenuated, emotional experience (Coplan & Goldie, 2011), thus leaving cognitive empathy aside completely. What is more, mirror neurons do not always succeed in producing such emotional empathy, because one's perspective and biases can either inhibit the empathic emotion once the mirror neurons fire or even prevent them from firing in the

first place (Wondra & Ellsworth, 2015). Mirror neurons are further limited by the fact that their operation requires direct perception (Wondra & Ellsworth, 2015). As an example of how this might be limiting, if someone is laughing while recounting a memory, the emotional content experienced at the time of the memory—perhaps shame, sadness, or anger—is not what will be experienced by the listener.

To return to a psychoanalytic perspective on empathy, Freud himself commented on empathy, although the term itself appears only seldomly in his oeuvre. In *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, he said, “A path leads from identification by way of imitation to empathy, that is, to the comprehension of the mechanism by means of which we are enabled to take up any attitude at all towards another mental life” (1921, p. 110), identification serving as “the original form of emotional tie” (p. 137) with someone. Thus, for Freud, identification is the condition for the possibility of empathy, of knowing or feeling something of the other’s experience. Identification with the other is a form of extimacy, whereby something perceived about the other is taken into the self. I would argue, however, that identification with the other is only necessary for one type of empathy, although it is likely the one most frequently employed. Using Lacan’s concept of the imaginary axis of experience, I propose that we can think of this type of empathy as *imaginary order empathy*. When we relate to another person on the imaginary axis (a term indicating experience at the level of the image), we are assuming similarity, of the other person being like us, and it also opens up the possibility for rivalry, superficial love or infatuation, aggression and hatred. Although in our everyday social lives, there may be times when imaginary order empathy results in stronger connections with others, we are often inaccurate in our attempts at empathy because we engage on the imaginary axis, relating from our own narcissistic perspective, imagining how we would feel if we were in the other’s shoes. Our misunderstandings, of course, can cause different types and levels of harm or hurt, depending upon the situation. What is more, we infrequently realize our mistaken attributions because we might keep them to ourselves and never question them in the face of evidence to the contrary, or the other person might shy away from correcting us, or we might have our own motivations for insisting that the other’s experience is like our own. Still further, because we can misrecognize our *jouissance*, we might imagine that we are experiencing empathic concern for someone begging on the street when instead we are experiencing disgust or anxiety.

What I am calling *symbolic order empathy*, on the other hand, involves an assumption of difference, rather than similarity, and the corresponding attempt to listen very carefully to the other person or to otherwise learn about the other’s own perspective without making comparisons to ourselves. Lacan’s symbolic order of experience is based on the signifier, on the words and discourses that make up our social world. In the absence of an imaginary order identification, emotional empathy does not result—only cognitive empathy—although that does not prevent another affect, such as compassion, from being experienced by us.

One barrier to experiencing either type of empathy is that doing so is in opposition with what Lacan referred to as our passion for ignorance, which exists alongside what Lacan considered to be the two other fundamental passions—love, and hate (Lacan, 1991). We can think here of the common excuse for not aiding those in need and for perpetuating forms of violence against denigrated others, of the claim, for instance, made by some Germans living during the Holocaust that they did not act because they did not know. Our passion for ignorance protects us from that which would be painful to face, and empathizing with someone who is suffering is not a pleasant experience. When we encounter a picture or video of someone in a tragic or otherwise pitiable situation, rather than empathizing we might instead feel relief that we are not the ones suffering, and then turn the channel or the page. Alternatively, when we see someone begging, we might turn quickly away, perhaps even pretending we do not see him or her, in order to avoid empathizing with that person or to avoid feeling guilt, disgust, or any number of negative emotions that might correspond to what the figure of the beggar brings up for us. Further, our passion for ignorance is operative when it comes to encountering difference. Although attempts at empathy are more likely when the target of our empathy is

someone with whom we identify in an ego-syntonic manner (i.e., someone about whom we have positive judgments), a common error in this situation is imagining too much similarity and wishing to avoid knowing the ways in which they might differ from us. This problem is endemic to the culture of drug and alcohol treatment in the U.S., whose providers and clients tend to assume that counselors or psychologists can only truly be helpful if they have “been through it themselves”, thus arguing that imaginary order empathy is the only possible way to be of assistance.

The imaginary axis is at the foundation of programs that use empathy training to reduce hostility towards an out-group. This viewpoint can shed light on the widespread failure of anti-bullying campaigns. It was not until 2011, when the White House called for a conference on bullying, that bullying was raised in the public awareness. It may be that the heightened visibility in the U.S. of terrorism and mass shootings corresponded to a fantasy that, if we adults cannot manage to get along, perhaps we can force our children to do so. Several meta-analyses of anti-bullying programs show that they are only effective at reducing bullying by 20-23% in what they call “ideal situations”—and typically these are restricted to elementary school-age children—as well as that some efforts actually managed to increase the likelihood of bullying, including zero tolerance policies, group treatment for bullies, short-term awareness raising events (Lai et al., 2017), and peer mediation (Ttofi & Farrington, 2009).

From a Lacanian standpoint, we can understand these failures as having to do with the observation that children who bully others relate to these peers on the imaginary axis of experience as a rival. Bullies operate through trying to raise their self-esteem by comparing themselves positively to certain peers whom they treat with hatred. As such, when anti-bullying programs attempt to preach compassionate empathy toward peers, they are ignoring the psychical importance that victims have for bullies. In this same vein, another study found that whereas in elementary school those who bully are socially rejected, by the time children reach middle school, those who bully have high social capital (Cook, Williams, Guerra, Kim, & Sadek, 2010). In other words, by and large bullies are in the in-crowd, and receive narcissistic boosts to their ego from the approval of their peers. This resembles adult life outside of school, in which those in power, politically, for example, often use bullying tactics and are far from being roundly rejected for doing so. A related problem is that there are often bystanders to bullying who for their own reasons are in tacit agreement with the aggressive behavior.

Via extimacy, the aggression involved in bullying is revealed as concerning that which is repressed in the bully—or the bystander—and is split off in the other, the victim. Bullying is about the hatred, fear, and/or *jealousness* (a neologism coined by Lacan meaning the *jouissance* one derives from jealousy) of some aspect of the victim, and this is an aspect that is intertwined with the bully her or himself. For instance, research on bullying, including a large longitudinal study (Espelage et al., 2015) of middle-schoolers found that between 35% and 50% of bullying is homophobic in nature. Attempts to make bullies empathize victims might threaten to expose their identifications with their victims, and consequently bullies will respond with still more hostility. Efforts to force bullies to compassionately empathize with their victims are destined to fail because they leave untreated what is hated in the other—a hatred which is intimately related to what is hated in the self. As Carol Owens and I have argued (2019), because we are fundamentally ambivalent beings, we cannot simply teach—via tools of empathizing—or otherwise force ourselves to love our fellow human being without addressing our hate. Otherwise, the variously repressed and disavowed aggression on the part of the Other as well as the children exhorted to love and not hate their *semblables* is bound to return.

To attempt to use empathy to reduce manifestations of aggression is to employ empathy in the service of the Good. From a Lacanian perspective, any project of the Good—however well-intentioned, is intertwined with aggression because it is conceived on the imaginary axis of experience. Correspondingly, in his seventh seminar on ethics, Lacan commented, “It is a fact of experience that what I want is the good of others in the image of my own....provided that it depends on my effort” (Lacan, 1997b, p. 187). In other words, we imagine what is good for the

other through the lens of our own biases and can feel aggressions—perhaps in the form of anger or resentment—when our efforts are not appreciated or acknowledged. Lacan therefore speaks of the “benevolent fraud of wanting-to-do-one’s-best-for-the subject” (ibid., p. 219) as one’s charitable intentions mask other, more selfish, motives. Indeed, in his essay “Aggressiveness in Psychoanalysis” Lacan comments that “only saints are sufficiently detached from the deepest of our shared passions to avoid the aggressive repercussions of charity” (Lacan, 2006, 87).

Anti-bullying programs are thus another symptomatic response to aggression. Operating as they do under the mirroring logic of the imaginary, the attempts of these campaigns to lovingly empathize in order to eradicate aggression in the form of bullying—these attempts are reaction formations which the aggression on the part of the Other (e.g., the authorities of the school system). Accordingly, Lacan spoke of “the aggressiveness that underlies the activities of the philanthropist” (2006, p. 81). As Marcelo Estrada put it, an anti-bullying program’s “us[e] or instrumentaliz[ation] of the happy and loving face of “empathy”, backed and enforced with the police power of state apparatuses, turns itself into another form of “bullying”, by the biggest “kid” (of all) in the block”—the big Other” (M. Estrada, personal communication, May 25, 2019). The structure of extimacy allows us to see that whereas we had thought that one’s own aggression (e.g., that of the bully) stemmed from an intimate private place, instead, one’s own aggression is topologically co-extensive with the aggression of the external societal Other.

## 5 | EMPATHY IS SHAPED BY BIASES

The assumption that positive outcomes will result from encounters with those who are different from us via the use of empathy is rife with problems, not the least of which is that we most often relate to such others on the imaginary axis. As such, when *operating via the imaginary axis and we are faced with the possibility of empathizing with someone, we do so in accordance with our own biases and our capacity to accept all aspects of our own experience with minimal judgment*. In terms of the latter, given the psychoanalytic notion of individuals as being split into conscious and unconscious processes, we can understand the great difficulty of this achievement. Not only are we structurally defensive subjects, but we are also shaped by society with all of its biases and blind spots. This renders it much more likely that we will use imaginary empathy rather than symbolic order empathy.

Under neoliberalism, accurate empathy and compassion for those in economically disadvantaged groups is rendered especially unlikely as neoliberal ideology promotes the idea that if someone is not thriving economically, it is due to their own moral faults and personal inadequacies rather than due to larger systemic issues, including racism and xenophobia. Indeed, via neoliberal ideology, viewing stigmatized groups as responsible for their plight extends beyond groups in economic distress, including racialized others (e.g., Reyna et al., 2006), those seen as mentally ill (e.g., Corrigan, Druss, & Perlick, 2014), those with HIV or AIDS (e.g., Cook & Dickens, 2014; Herek, Capitanio, & Widaman, 2002), and so on, and laboratory psychology research correspondingly finds that participants instructed to empathize with someone they view as responsible for her or his distress either are unable to do so or do so poorly (Batson, et al., 1997). Similarly, even in the early days of neoliberalism prior to the 1980 U.S. presidential election, Ronald Reagan’s campaign “successfully encouraged many poor whites to disidentify with poor blacks and to identify instead with whiteness and white privilege” (Layton, 2009, p. 108), rendering less likely any desire to empathize with black individuals because doing so might threaten the stability of their disidentification. For this reason, even those members of similarly disadvantaged groups may have difficulty empathizing with and feeling compassion for someone they can place in a group they see as somehow inferior. Exemplifying this are results from a Lacanian Discourse Analysis that, along with several colleagues, I conducted a few years ago of our interviews of food pantry clients (Swales et al, 2020). Many participants sought to disidentify with being a “beggar” through their attempts to



pass as food secure—attempts which often included avoiding getting needed food assistance. This rendered those others who didn't try to pass and who regularly sought food assistance either as shamelessly pursuing jouissance or as those who were somehow more truly in need and therefore more deserving. Engaging in either fantasied portrayal of the other food insecure clients seen as different from the self could result in inaccurate empathizing. For instance, one middle-aged white male participant said,

*all the blacks and the Hispanics and...I don't know. I-I've been down here [referring to the line of people waiting outside the food pantry before it opens]. So, it's like it's all owed to them... That-them people know, they what the schedules are. They know where you can go [to get food assistance].*

Via his racist biases, this client seems to be engaging in inaccurate imaginary order empathy, whereby he imagines the black and Hispanic clients are acting as though they believe "it's all owed to them". This quote also serves as an example of another strategy for preventing feelings of shame or guilt in a neoliberal society that was frequently used by the food pantry clients we interviewed: distancing themselves from other food insecure groups whom they regarded as morally reprehensible. For instance, after we announced our study to food pantry clients in the waiting room,

*a client shouted that it was "disgusting" that we were offering to give money to "these people" who were "just going to use it to go get high"—those undeserving of food assistance who are thieves of enjoyment from whom this client was keen to separate herself. (Swales et al., 2020, p. 682)*

This client was trying to distance herself from the other food pantry clients, thereby placing herself in a morally superior position. In so doing, her biases against them informed her conclusion that volunteers for the study would use the study compensation to pay for drugs—a conclusion which could have been reached with or without the use of imaginary order cognitive empathy. She certainly did not seem to have made the effort to consider other possible things the other clients had been thinking, feeling, or intending upon hearing the interviewers' description of the study and its compensation. Both of these clients, then, sought to differentiate themselves from those whom they saw as somehow illegitimately or excessively enjoying.

On account of the neoliberal emphasis on money and enjoyment as rewards for virtues related to work (working hard, having ingenuity, etc.) such that those seemingly without these virtues do not deserve to have money or other forms of enjoyment, neoliberal ideology fuels judgments like those of the just-mentioned food bank client. These judgments typically accompany the various forms of xenophobia (including racism), or fear and hatred of the stranger, the outsider. Xenophobia is one form of bias that either renders empathy unlikely or, via imaginary order empathy, inaccurate and certainly not leading to any positive societal change. By way of further elaborating the Lacanian subject, I will now briefly detail xenophobia from a Lacanian analytic point of view and further explicate how it ensures the absence of any type of empathy that would lead to positive social change.

In psychoanalytic theory, the process of socialization of children involves giving up a certain amount of jouissance. This is referred to as castration by Freud and Lacan, and is represented in weaning, in toilet training, and in learning things such as the importance of sharing what one has and being kind to others. Once we have undergone castration, we are left with a lasting sense that whatever jouissance we have gained in becoming a part of the social sphere (e.g., praise and symbolic successes) does not make up for what we have lost. We have many defenses against recognizing the fact of our castration; in other words, we ward away acknowledgement that this lack of jouissance is a permanent feature of ourselves. Instead, we find ways to fantasize that if only we were to achieve this or that success,

to obtain this or that item, to have this or that experience, and so on, that we would be truly and fully happy. This is reflected in Lacan's general formula for fantasy,  $\$ \diamond a$ , read as the split (into conscious and unconscious) or lacking subject in relation to or in desire for the object  $a$ . The object  $a$  is akin to Freud's concept of *das Ding*, the lost object, and for Lacan is an object in the order of the real; in other words, it is not an actual object but instead corresponds to the subject's lack or to the *jouissance* that has been relinquished. As such, in Lacanian theory it is either considered to be the object-cause of desire or of *jouissance*, depending upon which perspective is emphasized.

Via the subject's castration and the formula for fantasy, we can understand that the other who is different from us often plays two related roles. First, as standing in for the lozenge or as barring our access to the object and a state of complete satisfaction. Second, as representing the Other who has stolen our *jouissance*, which Derek Hook (2018) has catchily dubbed the thief of *jouissance*. Xenophobia operates by figuring the denigrated other as thief as someone who enjoys more than we do, and that their *jouissance* is illicit or somehow undeserved. For instance, the immigrant is often figured as someone who has stolen jobs or food off of the tables of rightful citizens. Consider, as another example, the stereotype that those in poverty are enjoying living off the taxes of hard-working Americans—as though people who receive government assistance are really living it up! Viewing the figure of the other in this way allows us to pretend that overcoming castration is possible. It perpetuates the xenophobic fantasy that getting rid of the immigrant, the racialized other, and so on would restore our rightful access to a fullness of *jouissance*. This links up with my earlier point about Lacan's discourse of the capitalist because today's neoliberal subject operates under the fantasy that s/he is but one mansion or one empathy training course away from a fully satisfying life. Viewing the figure of the different other as thief of *jouissance*, as standing in the way of our access to the object, also distracts us from criticizing the structure of neoliberalism itself. Furthermore, our xenophobia itself provides us with *jouissance*; this is demonstrated in the enjoyment derived from racist jokes or in complaining. Consequently, because xenophobia not only provides us with a way to deny our own castration but also a modicum of *jouissance* in and of itself, xenophobia is very difficult to relinquish—and certainly such a *jouissance* overshadows any pleasures that may be associated with experiencing empathic concern.

Empathy, specifically imaginary order empathy, can and does occur when someone is in the throes of xenophobic hatred. In other words, empathy, far from succeeding in changing the xenophobe's mind, can actually play a role in fueling the xenophobia. Empathy corresponds with whatever hatred or love is already present for the target of empathy. It can either be applied to the target of xenophobia or to the other party (as the figure consciously viewed as being similar to oneself), if there is one. Just as in cases in which someone identifies with another person along the lines of similarity, so too can imaginary order empathy function when rivalry is in operation via seeing someone as a thief of *jouissance*. For instance, at a campaign rally in Lynden, Washington leading up to the 2016 election, Donald Trump said, "Hillary Clinton wants to take your guns away, and she wants to abolish the second amendment" (CNN, 2016). Because Hillary Clinton never said she wanted to abolish the second amendment (to the U.S. Constitution), Trump or someone on his staff could have cognitively empathized with her in order to discern her unstated motivations. This statement figures Hillary as threatening to steal the gun-wielding *jouissance* of conservatives, and is therefore either xenophobia in relation to liberals or to women—as wanting to steal the phallic object—or both.

In this situation as well as others, we can also see that empathy is not a necessary condition for xenophobia, because individuals can simply apply their biases to characterize the group of people rather than thinking about their experience. For this reason, even in laboratory psychology studies of empathy, it is not possible to tell from the speech or written words of someone whether or not their conclusion was reached by empathizing. Nevertheless, there are undoubtedly many instances in which people encounter someone about whom they are xenophobic, related to on the imaginary axis as a rival, and imagine what that person is thinking, feeling, or intending. We can find examples of this corresponding to every xenophobic stereotype.

Take, for instance, the racist stereotype that black men are aggressive. Combined with the stereotypes that black people live in relative poverty or are not honest, hardworking neoliberal citizens, we can think of many instances in which a white woman walking down the street clutches her purse upon spotting a black man along her path. At such a time, she could be imagining that the man might want to rob her and might think she is an easy target. This scenario quite literally figures the black man as a thief of jouissance. Similarly, a racist meme (iFunny, 2020) entitled “the 30 year old looter” features the caricature of a black man’s grinning face and references to the Black Lives Matter protests in the wake of the 2020 murder of George Floyd along with suppositions of his internal experience. Grammatical errors and all, these suppositions include “AAAAAAA I’M GONNA LOOT!!!!”, “ends police brutality by looting a 80” TV”, and “ayo whats antifa”. This meme renders the chief perpetrator of the looting (that occurred at some of the protests) a young black man, ignorant of politics, who imagines he is supporting the Black Lives Matter movement through opportunistically breaking into storefronts and stealing objects of enjoyment. Although obviously a caricature of someone’s idea of a typical looter, it speaks to what many must have envisioned via imaginary order empathy when faced with the question of the motivations of the looters.

Similarly, we can empathize in accordance with our own biases, including xenophobic ones, by engaging in imaginary order empathy for the party one views as having been wronged in some way by the xenophobic figure. Via ego-syntonic identification or identification with an aspect of someone that is judged as positive, this party is consciously seen as similar to oneself. For example, in early February of 2021, a video published by TMZ depicted country music star Morgan Wallen, outside of his home, instructing his friend to “take care of this pussy ass ni\*\*er” in reference to a black man also present at the scene (TMZ, 2021). Although Wallen was widely criticized for his use of the n-word, so many fans defended him that Wallen, after apologizing, released a public comment instructing his fans to stop defending him (Leimkuehler, 2021). Wallen’s instruction to his fans came over a week after the highly publicized video was posted, and in this interim his recently released album increased in sales by 102%, and song downloads from the album increased by 67% (Leimkuehler, 2021). This trend continued, and by six weeks after the video, Wallen’s album became the first country album in history to have spent nine consecutive weeks at the top of the Billboard 200 chart (Yahr, E., 2021). Although Wallen faced consequences unprecedented in the country music industry for his racial slur—presumably due to the current popularity of the Black Lives Matter movement—involving being dropped from his talent agency, WME, and being “suspended indefinitely” by his record label, Big Loud as well as hundreds of radio stations dropping his songs from airplay, *Country Insider* reported that some stations had been slowly resuming playing Wallen’s music (Country Insider, 2021). From its very inception, the country music industry has engaged in racism against black people (Abdelmehmoud, E., 2020), and it remains endemic to the industry today, as noted by Lorie Leibig, a Nashville music journalist who commented that in the industry, racist actions such as those of Wallen are “usually dealt with very quietly, if it’s dealt with at all” (Oliver, D., 2021).

Many fans defended Wallen, as exemplified in over 34k likes received on an Instagram post made by a Nashville music executive that described him as “maybe a little ignorant”, having “lost his fight with alcohol”, and who did not “deserve this” (kiyahmarie, 2021). Comments included references to “cancel culture” and supportive posts were made by some country music stars. In the spike in record sales after Wallen’s use of the n-word as well as in responses such as these of the fans who defended him, we can see evidence of widespread imaginary order empathy for Wallen. This empathizing could also involve identification with Wallen’s contemporary brand of racism: wherein a privileged white person says or does something racist and then apologizes—possibly for the sake of his public image—in the perhaps sincere conscious belief that he has done something wrong, while at the same time offering an excuse (i.e., that he was at the end of a 72-hour alcohol bender) even though he claimed he was “fully” taking responsibility (Leimkuehler, 2021). Consciously believing oneself to have committed an unpardonable action and to be accepting full responsibility certainly does not mean that someone will be able to avoid future racist bias, just as someone who

consciously believes s/he is not racist could easily be engaging in self-deception.

## 6 | CONCLUDING THOUGHTS: JOUISSANCE, XENOPHOBIA & EXTIMACY

I have demonstrated numerous ways in which empathy is not the fantasied cure-all for our problems with our neighbor who elicits our hatred. Ultimately, it is only through taking into account the structure of subjectivity according to Lacan that renders visible the errors in utilizing empathy to cure our hatred for the neighbor. We are beings split into conscious and unconscious processes, irrevocably lacking in jouissance, and who typically relate to the other who is different from us on the imaginary instead of the symbolic axis; as such, we most often empathize in accordance with our biases and our characteristically limited capacity to accept our own experience. What results are not only inaccuracies in empathy but even harm, including adding fuel to the fire of one's hatred. Also destined to fail, from a systemic perspective, are empathy programs operating via the master's discourse in the service of the good as well as those that are thoroughly intertwined in neoliberalism, in the capitalist discourse.

Before providing concluding thoughts, I would like to further explicate the importance of viewing ourselves as extimate subjects in relation to shortcomings of empathy in addressing the problem of hatred of the other who is different from us. In Lacan's later work, he uses the Torus and the Moebius strip to illustrate the topological formation of subjectivity as being rooted in extimacy. In Lacan's estimation, the Torus demonstrates that on the other side of the subject is the Other, and that at a certain point it eludes us to tell the difference between the two. Likewise, the cut used to make the Moebius strip demonstrates the impossibility of locating where inside and outside begin and end. On account of the subject's extimate topography, we are unable to discern whether jouissance is our own or that of the other.

When we are exhorted to lovingly understand our neighbor, the biggest barrier to empathy is our relationship to her or his jouissance. Lacan speaks to this in his seventh seminar:

*every time that Freud stops short in horror at the consequences of the commandment to love one's neighbor, we see evoked the presence of that fundamental evil [the neighbor's jouissance] which dwells within this neighbor. But if that is the case, then it also dwells within me. And what is more of a neighbor to me than this heart within which is that of my jouissance and which I don't dare go near? (1997b, p. 186)*

Viewing the target of xenophobia as the barrier to and thief of one's jouissance is what is central to the forms of xenophobia. Jacques-Alain Miller has stated that extimacy is founded upon jouissance, and that it is jouissance which grounds the alterity of the Other because words fall irrevocably short in representing difference (Miller, 1994, p. 79). As Miller put it, "There is no other enjoyment but my own. If the Other is in me, occupying the place of extimacy, then the hatred is also my own" (Miller, cited in Žižek, 1993, p. 203). At the same time, our jouissance is also a treasured part of ourselves, and it is on this account that Carol Owens and I have argued that ambivalence is at the foundation of xenophobia. We call it "an extimate ambivalence at the heart of being" (Swales & Owens, 2019, p. 119). This extimate ambivalence renders empathizing unlikely to cure our hatred of the Other, because our perception of the Other's jouissance more properly reflects our own jouissance, rejected into the outside and perceived in another person.

Via extimacy, we can see that empathy only truly stands a chance at decreasing aggression if we should find a way to deal with the jouissance of both the neighbor and ourselves. Working through our extimate ambivalence about our own jouissance as well as that of the neighbor will substantially reduce distortions and avoidances of the

neighbor's experience via empathy and open up an easier path to more fruitful engagements with symbolic order empathy. However, under neoliberalism this is rendered especially unlikely, as hatred of the neighbor in the absence of reckoning with one's own jouissance is one common way of denying castration—an endeavor that is at the heart of neoliberalism. Outside of reaching the endpoint of psychoanalysis, at which point subjects can accept their lack as well as work through their extimate ambivalence regarding their jouissance, the paths to reduced hostilities with out-groups and easier access to symbolic order empathy remain a very tall order.

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