Abstract: In contrast to other major schools of psychoanalysis, Lacanian psychoanalysis views the concept of empathy with circumspection because as a way of knowing something about the analysand's experience it is seen to operate in the Imaginary order; that is, empathy from this perspective understands the other's experience on the basis of one's own experience, thus colonizing the other's difference and obscuring the domains of the unconscious and the Real, or that which escapes and resists being symbolized. The present research seeks to critically question and complicate this view of empathy in Lacanian psychoanalysis. Using transcriptions of our qualitative interviews with twelve practicing Lacanian analysts about their views on empathy and what place if any it has in their analytic practice, we conducted a reflexive thematic analysis to discern how empathy may play a number of unacknowledged roles in Lacanian psychoanalysis and/or be used in novel ways that might contribute to the theorizations of empathy within Lacanian as well as other traditions of psychoanalysis. To interpret the analysts' viewpoints, we used Lacanian discourse theory because it provides an account of how Lacanian analysts listen and intervene in analytic practice. We applied a reflexive thematic analysis to identify four themes: empathy in the imaginary can be harmful, empathy in the imaginary can be helpful, empathy exercised from the analyst's position in the Symbolic can honor the difference of the analysand, and such an empathy can be attuned towards the Real or the impossible but without claiming to understand.

Keywords: empathy; Lacan; thematic analysis; psychoanalysis; qualitative

With the exception of Lacanian psychoanalysis, since the work of Ralph Greenson and Heinz Kohut back in the 1950s and 60s (Greenson, 1960; Kohut, 1959), most schools of psychoanalysis have afforded empathy a prominent role in the theory and practice of psychoanalysis (Bolognini, 2004; McWilliams, 2004). Contemporary psychoanalysts such as Nancy McWilliams (2004), Stefano Bolognini (2004), Donna Orange (1995), and Stephen Mitchell (1988) argue for the centrality of empathy in psychoanalytic practice not only as a way of knowing the other but also as a way of connecting with the analysand. For instance, Bolognini (2004) defines empathy as both conscious and preconscious, constituting "a progressive, shared, and deep contact with the complementarity of the object, with the other's defensive ego and split-off parts, no less than the other's ego-syntonic subjectivity" (p. 141). Whether in terms of the errors and dangers of identification or the fact that psychoanalytic empathy must be attuned to "the other's defensive ego and split-off parts" (ibid., p. 141), although empathy in psychoanalysis is widely considered to be crucial to the treatment, it is certainly not restricted to an uncomplicated and easy experience of understanding or being understood (Kohut, 1984; Stolorow, 2011).

Empathy within the practice of psychoanalysis typically involves a combination of what empirical psychology refers to as emotional empathy—feeling what the other is feeling—and cognitive empathy, or thinking what the other is thinking (Coplan & Goldie, 2011). With some commonalities such as these, each school has its own definition(s) of empathy and accompanying notions of how it fits within analytic practice, yet similar literature within the tradition of Lacanian psychoanalysis is next to nonexistent (Hamburg, 1991; Swales, 2022). At the same time, no matter the school of psychoanalysis there is a dearth of empirical research on how empathy is employed in analysis and with what effects. It therefore seems important to study the ways in which empathy is practiced in psychoanalysis and within Lacanian psychoanalysis in particular, as Lacanian psychoanalysis is practiced around the world and perhaps increasingly so in the U.S. (e.g., as demonstrated by a recent special issue of the *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association* devoted to "Lacan in America"; 2024). Doing so will not only add Lacanian notions of empathy to the rich conversations already happening within psychoanalysis about empathy but also build the theory of Lacanian psychoanalysis itself and, in turn, influence its practice.

One reason why empathy may not have a place in the Lacanian lexicon is that it is thought to depend upon the mechanism of identification and thereby to revolve around Lacan's Imaginary order of experience, in which one believes in how things appear to be and the Otherness of the other is reduced to something that fits within one's own perspective. Because empathy within psychoanalysis is intended as an epistemological tool or a way of knowing something about the analysand's experience—rather than about one's own—the theory of Lacanian psychoanalysis might have an important critique of certain psychoanalytic notions of the utility of empathy. At the same time, it may be that there are other ways in which Lacanians already employ empathy to the benefit of their practice but without recognizing it as such. In this vein, we sought with our reflexive thematic analysis of semi-structured qualitative interviews with Lacanian analysts to render explicit what is already implicit in Lacanian theory and practice as well as to engage in theory building about the role(s) of empathy in Lacanian psychoanalysis. To interpret the analysts' viewpoints, (following the lead of Dulsster et al., 2021) we used Lacanian discourse theory because the discourse of the analyst in comparison with the other three (or four; see Lacan, 1972 and Vanheule, 2016) discourses provides an important model of the way in which analysts should position themselves within the treatment in order to facilitate change. As such the current article aims to investigate how empathy can be theorized and practiced within Lacanian psychoanalysis. We begin with a brief review of Lacan's discourse theory as elaborated in his seventeenth seminar (2007).

Lacan's Discourse Theory

For Lacan, a discourse is a certain fundamental social relation or link which cannot "be maintained without language" (2007, p. 13) and yet "goes much further than actual utterances" (p. 13), defining human reality and the nature of social bonds. Each of his four discourses entails a different way of dealing with the non-rapport of the sexual relation and the *das Unbehagen* or the discontents at the heart of human social relations. The non-rapport refers to the absence of fixed rules that govern human relationships, such that language is necessary to forge any social connection. In the use of language, something about human experience is always lost in translation. We inevitably fail to capture into words the complexities of our own experience, let alone ensure our message is received and interpreted by

another exactly as it was intended. This means that there is a central failure or impossibility in human experience and human relationships, which are inherently asymmetrical. These impossibilities which resist being rendered into speech are what constitute Lacan's order of the Real; along with the Symbolic and the Imaginary, the Real is one of Lacan's three registers of human experience. The Real is the stuff of the partial drives, of libido and jouissance (a painful type of enjoyment associated with exceeding the pleasure principle), and of aspects of our experience which are impossible to symbolize. The Real of the non-rapport also demonstrates the limits of understanding and the impossibility of harmonious social relationships and communication. (Figure 1)

Lacan's order of the Symbolic is equated with the structure of language itself, and therefore each of Lacan's discourses has a common structure comprised of four positions which rotate in a fixed order when changing discourses and are connected via a fixed set of directional arrows. In the top left we have the agent who mobilizes the discourse through turning with some communication to an other, in the top right. This relationship is marked by impossibility, as there is no law, no inherent connection between the two. In the bottom left we have the position of the truth that underpins the discourse, a truth that, as under the bar, is repressed and creates the desire that motivates the discourse—a truth that only makes itself known after the fact, after the agent addresses the other. Indicated by the arrow, this repressed truth has effects on the agent. On the bottom right we have the product of the discourse, of the interaction between agent and other, and that product then has effects on the agent, after which the process of discourse begins anew. There are no arrows connecting the truth and the product, however, because they constitute a fundamental non-rapport.

The Symbolic order of experience consists of the signifier, on the words and discourses that condition how we understand the social world (Lacan, 1957/2006). Meaning and understanding aren't in language itself but instead are part of the Imaginary in how it intertwines with the Symbolic; in other words, meaning is negotiated in interactions between an individual and the other, and in any interaction the gap between what is meant and the message that is understood is the Real.   The Symbolic is the grammar of language, which is comprised of signifiers that have the possibility for meaning by virtue of

their differences from one another. Lacan has famously claimed that "the unconscious is language"
(1958/2006, p. 694), which is to say, for one thing, that the subject has internalized the structure of
language, which is Other than the self, along with the laws, norms, and beliefs that correspond to
someone's particular socio-symbolic context. Relating to another on the Symbolic axis therefore is aimed
at the Otherness or difference of the other rather than on the (supposedly) shared meanings of the
Imaginary. Lacan recommended analytic listening and intervention from a position on the Symbolic axis,
which focuses on free-floating attention and careful listening to the letter of the signifier, to what was
actually said more so than the meaning of what the analysand was trying to convey, to negations, slips of
the tongue, hesitations, and so on—in short, listening for the unconscious and the Otherness of the other.

Lacan's main four discourses as presented in Seminar XVII include the discourse of the master,
the discourse of the university, the discourse of the hysteric and the discourse of the analyst. They make
use of four key terms that rotate in a fixed order, such that each discourse is one of the four possible
permutations: a master signifier (S1), knowledge as a chain of signifiers (S2), the divided subject ($), and
object petit (*a*). The subject is not whole, not S, but $ divided or barred insofar as it is split into conscious
and unconscious processes, is subjected to the endless circuit of the drives, and is thus irreducibly lacking
in jouissance. A master signifier is a word or term that provides coherence to speech, is an unquestioned
truth claim, or takes on special significance for an individual (perhaps concerning someone's primary
identifications). Again and again, an analysand chooses a certain master signifier around which their
narratives about themselves, the world, and others revolve. These narratives or knowledge are S2, which
always follows S1 in a discourse. Attachment to certain explanatory master signifiers assists the
individual in covering over the Real of subjective division or lack. Object *a* stands for lack. As an object
in the Real, it is the lost object, the object of the drives, and the object-cause of desire and jouissance.

The Discourse of the Master (Figure 2)

Beginning with the discourse of the master, it is mobilized when someone plays the role of an
authority and gives orders (S1) to the other (S2) who is put to work to respond in some way in accordance
with some knowledge. More simply, the agent could be communicating something that they feel is

meaningful or has value. What is produced in this discourse never matches up to what the master figure initially desired, and as such the product is represented by the object *a*, the semblance of what the subject is lacking that, as an object in the Real always eludes the subject's grasp. Whenever someone states something with authority, they deny the lack in their own subjectivity ($) and any gaps in their own knowledge or awareness.

With subjective division thus in the repressed position of truth, the master figure (S1) relates to the other (S2) on Lacan's Imaginary axis. The Imaginary refers to the realm of images, visual, tactile, and to all which has to do with our perspective or point of view. As such, when we relate to the other on the Imaginary axis we imagine the other is similar to the self and that they should feel, think, and behave like ourselves. Things make sense or appear meaningful insofar as they conform to our narcissistic ways of being in the world, and when operating on the Imaginary axis we ignore or deny that which does not fit into our worldview. In the Imaginary axis, we repress our subjective division ($) and attempt to take out of the equation what we do not understand about ourselves and about the other. For instance, a therapist (S1) makes an empathic statement to a patient (S2), saying "It's awful to feel left out". The patient then produces a response (object *a*) which at best temporarily helps them feel better or inspires them to speak more about the pain of feeling left out and at worst is incorrect and produces negative judgments of the therapist and painful emotions related to feeling misunderstood, but the empathic intervention fails to produce the desired effect. This is because what is more fundamentally left out is subjective division— both that of the therapist and the patient. It may be that the patient has a long history of enjoying being left out and of making themselves excluded or more generally that this Imaginary order empathic intervention provides satisfaction rather than facilitating questioning of the unconscious or encounters with lack. But more fundamentally, when a therapist believes in their understanding of the patient, the therapist is operating on the Imaginary axis and is unable to attend to the Otherness of the patient.

The University Discourse (Figure 3)

With a counterclockwise turn from the master's discourse we get the university discourse, a form of social bond which builds on the proclamation of knowledge (S2). The fact that such knowledge always

rests on the acceptance of hidden assumptions (S1) is ignored in this discourse, allowing the agent to proclaim their knowledge from a position of mastery. Characteristically, the other is put in the place of the object (a), such that the other is reduced to a mere object or entity in relation to whom the knowledge can be applied. This produces discontent ($), seen by way of the split subject, which fuels further knowledge creation (S2). The split subject in the position below the bar of product also indicates the elements of the unconscious and of subjectivity that are ignored by this proclamation of knowledge, which are bound to return when unaddressed.

The Hysteric's Discourse (Figure 4)

Alternatively, a quarter-turn clockwise from the master's discourse results in the hysteric's discourse. In this discourse, the agent is represented by the divided subject insofar as they recognize their suffering and address their complaints to an other who is presumed to be a kind of master figure who has an answer (S1) for what bothers the subject/agent. This discourse represses the truth that all desire rests on a lack that cannot be eradicated (a) and results in the production of narratives (S2) that don't solve the fundamental lack (a) but instead engender further suffering ($) and requests directed to another (S1). The knowledge (S2) produced by the master figure—including empathic knowledge—is constitutively bound to miss the mark for several reasons: it is not tailored to the singularity of the divided subject, it aims to plug up the subject's lack rather than accepting the irrevocable division in the subject, and it is proclaimed from a position of master which itself denies lack. That being said, the optimal discursive position for the analysand to occupy is that of the divided subject in the discourse of the hysteric since they are admitting that they are lacking and addressing their suffering to another. In order to be helpful, however, the analyst cannot believe in the analysand's fantasy that they are an uncastrated master.

The Analyst's Discourse (Figure 5)

Instead, in the discourse of the analyst, the analyst plays the role of the object *a*, embodying a way of being comfortable with lack and incarnating a present absence for the analysand other. The object of the drive or object-cause of the Other's desire might in this sense operate via the silence (incarnating

the semblance of the voice, the object *a* of the invocatory drive) of the analyst in response to the analysand's question, "Do you understand what that was like for me?" This initially confusing response pairs with other interventions that do not align with the expected provision of knowledge or ready-made solutions to create a radically non-reciprocal social bond in which the analysand can articulate subjective division ($). Thus, analysands are not only invited to take themselves up as divided subjects in the sense of suffering, like the agent in the discourse of the hysteric, but in the sense of being subjects split into conscious and unconscious processes and lacking in jouissance. The analyst attends to the singularity of the analysand by bracketing their psychiatric and even psychoanalytic knowledge (S2)—and thus avoiding adopting the position of the master—in order to allow the master signifiers (S1) that mark the subjectivity of the analysand to be formulated and put into question.

Instead of producing meaning, the analyst engages in the essential analytic act of "support[ing] speech" (Lacan, 1966/2006, p. 290). The analyst, through silence, careful listening, and repeating back certain things that the analysand has said (especially polyvalent speech) in an invitation to listen to themselves with an ear toward the unconscious motivates the analysand to say everything that comes to mind and to put themselves and their symptoms into question. Further, the enigma of the analyst's desire allows for a questioning of and encounter with the Other's desire in the transference. Lacanian interpretation and other forms of intervention aims not at insight or understanding, but instead at the Real in order to help transform the analysand's symptom and relationship to the drives. The analysand is the one put to work and over the course of analysis will replace or refashion master signifiers that they felt had been imposed on them by the Other with new signifiers or with signifiers taken up in a new way that the subject nominates for themselves and are effectively more consonant with their desire.

Method

Sample

Our research sample is composed of twelve practicing U.S.-based Lacanian analysts whose practices were well-established and who had completed formal analytic training—six men and six

women—and agreed to participate in this research, which was approved by an Institutional Review Board.

Interviews and Data Analysis

Semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted with our twelve participants on the topic of how they understand empathy and what role, if any, empathy plays in their analytic practice. Eight interviews were conducted by Author1 and four interviews were conducted by Author2; with the exception of follow-up prompts and questions, both interviewers asked the same questions (see Appendix 1). We attempted to situate ourselves in the discourse of the analyst by serving as the cause of their desire to speak openly about and take a questioning stance regarding empathy. We asked questions aimed at eliciting participants' active theorizing of empathy from a Lacanian perspective and how their ways of practicing psychoanalysis might either avoid or make use of empathy depending upon the situation.

The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. All interviews were independently analyzed by the authors following the six-phase analytic process of Thematic Analysis as originally developed by Braun and Clarke (2006) and further specified by Terry, Hayfield, Clarke and Braun (2017). Terry et al. (2017) purposely uses the term 'phases' rather than 'steps' to describe the process of Thematic Analysis, since this method is iterative and recursive rather than linear (p. 23). **(1)** Each of us engaged in an initial phase of *familiarization with the interview data* that began by establishing the interview transcripts and thoroughly going over each interview. The purpose of this data familiarization was to attain a holistic sense of the data set that could inform the subsequent development of more granular level codes as well as begin to suggest possible themes. **(2)** Next, we *generated initial codes* by identifying discrete sections of the text that conveyed a particular meaning and provided a label that succinctly summarized this meaning. Our approach to coding privileged an inductive logic, in so far as we were interested in pinpointing and highlighting the idiosyncrasies of our participants' meaning making, rather than mapping out the data set with pre-existing semantic categories. Additionally, the coding of the data involved the identification of both semantic or explicit meanings as well as potentially latent meanings as interpreted by the researchers. **(3)** Once the initial codes were established, we *searched for themes*. We

engaged in an inductive approach to thematic construction based on our interpretation of similarities in the data both within and across interviews to establish underlying patterns in the experiences of participants. Quotations in the transcripts were color-coded to highlight similarities in content across the data set. Themes were generated through prioritizing those that related to the purpose of the study; for instance common opinions about the similarities and differences between in-person versus technologically-mediated analysis insofar as they failed to connect to common differences in the way empathy was conceptualized or practiced. **(4)** We *reviewed our initial themes* in the context of the data set as a whole. As part of this process, the researchers' own subjective positions were reflected upon in its role in assigning meaning and importance to the themes. More specifically, this had to do with the researchers' own familiarity with and ideas about the role of empathy in Lacanian practice given that all three researchers are well-versed in Lacanian theory and have undergone or were currently undergoing Lacanian psychoanalysis, and that the primary research is herself a practicing Lacanian analyst. Care was taken to ensure that each theme could be substantiated by quotations across the data set.

In generating themes, we took care to establish interrater reliability by utilizing Hill et al.'s (1997) suggestions concerning Consensual Qualitative Research. They suggest that researchers arrive at consensus through open dialogue and through collaborating as a team to construct shared understandings of the object of inquiry. As such, the process involves openly exploring all ideas, being willing to compromise, and attending carefully to power dynamics while aiming towards enabling each researcher's voice to be heard and valued. It was in this way that after the establishment of provisional themes, we met to discuss our themes—noting points of agreement as well as differences. Subsequently, the first author conducted a consensus coding for the interviews followed by **(5)** *defining and naming themes and subthemes* across the data set. The resulting themes were clustered together to comprise broader themes, ensuring that connections between the themes and interviews could be identified. A table of the themes and subthemes was created and presented to the other two researchers. A final discussion was held which resulted in some reorganization of the thematic table and modifications of theme names; this process

yielded four themes. **6)** The most evocative data extracts were selected in order to aid in *writing the report*.

Results

First, participants identified that typical notions of empathy as understanding and/or sharing the thoughts and feelings of the analysand operate within the Imaginary register and therefore are often harmful to the analysand and to the progress of the analysis itself. Participants spoke about the dangers of believing one understands the analysand versus honoring the limits of understanding and the Otherness of the other. Second, contrary to what might be expected from Lacanians, many participants spoke of occasions upon which it could be beneficial and even necessary to the progression of the analysis to try to understand the analysand's Imaginary order experience—that is, their self-picture or conscious understanding of their experience. Such occasions were identified to occur most frequently during the initial stage of analysis in which analysands need to feel as though the analyst understands their lived experiences as a prerequisite to being able to question those experiences and investigate their lacunae. Third, interviewees discussed how empathy could be a part of what it means to occupy the position of the analyst within the analyst's discourse. In this sense, regardless of whether or not analysts are using empathy within the treatment, analysands were hypothesized to feel empathized with on account of the careful listening that is part and parcel of the position of the analyst. In addition, participants reported having an empathy that is attuned to the logical moments of the structure of analysis, beginning with the suffering and difficulty involved in the initial sessions. More fundamentally, participants discussed key aspects of what the first author calls "negative empathy" (redacted, *in press*): motivated by the desire of the analyst, negative empathy is a deep curiosity about a particular analysand's unconscious—a curiosity that is aware of the limits of understanding—that leads to a kind of knowledge that is bracketed or put under question but that has the potential to inform the analyst's interventions and way of listening. Finally, interviewees highlighted the potential for Real order empathy, in which an analyst is aware of the operations of the Real of the analysand and potentially has an embodied sense or a dream (about an analysand) that something important is going on in the treatment that goes beyond what is possible to put

into words. Straying from Lacan's distaste for the term countertransference, some analysts said that paying attention to their own countertransference could be potentially important to the treatment if it is an instance of Real order empathy rather than their own personal experience. Below, we discuss each theme in detail.

Theme 1: "Imaginary Order Empathy Can be Harmful"

First, referring to the common definitions of empathy such as "sharing feelings", "putting yourself in the other person's shoes", and "understanding" or "knowing" something about the experience of the analysand, participants said that practicing these can be harmful to the analysis because they typically correspond to Imaginary order ways of relating to the analysand and operating in the discourse of the master. In other words, when an analyst practices empathy from the position of the master, s/he believes in the truth value of what can only be an assumption about the otherness of the other—a conclusion based on relating to the analysand on the Imaginary axis of experience. Empathy in the Imaginary operates when an analyst believes in what seems on the surface to be true about the other's experience, forgetting in so doing that such understanding is made possible through making an interpretation based on their own perspective—whether more "personal" or theoretical. This move narcissistically flattens the other's experience to something akin to their own. In this vein, Analyst 7 pointed out "It's very hard to find a limit in terms of where do you stop, where do you understand the difference between the two of you? At what point are you 'projecting'?"

What is more, because Imaginary order empathy relies upon understanding, participants recalled Lacan's teaching about the limits of understanding: at "the very foundation of interhuman discourse is misunderstanding" (1997, p. 184). Participants remarked that believing that one can understand the analysand is not only harmful when that understanding is sufficiently off the mark as to cause the analysand to feel the pain of being misunderstood but also insofar as Imaginary order empathy is antithetical to holding open an ethical space for questioning the unconscious, what is unknown, and what cannot be known about the otherness of the other (i.e. the Real). For instance, Analyst 8 described their work with an analysand who ended the treatment early. Not only was this analysand the first in Analyst

8's analytic practice to share their mother tongue, but there were also some striking surface similarities between the two of them. Analyst 8 remarked,

> I got caught into that identification. And I felt like I was feeling everything he was experiencing... So I felt a lot of empathy for him in his situation. Hindsight, 2020, right? I felt a lot of empathy. The Imaginary one, like oh, yeah, I know what you're talking about…and I was not being an analyst in that position…Because of the language I thought I knew what he was talking about. And *I stopped questioning signifiers*. (*emphasis added*)

The work of psychoanalysis from a Lacanian perspective revolves around questioning signifiers or highlighting the speech of the analysand in order to aim at the Real and facilitate putting the analysand to work in investigating the unconscious.

Paradoxically, racism and other forms of xenophobia can thrive on Imaginary order empathy (Swales, 2022). In Analyst 3's words,

> the attention of this *Einfühlung* or empathy is supposed to pretend that the subject could know something about the other as if it was identical to what the subject he him or herself experiences—which is a huge leap, of course. And I think precisely annuls or annihilates, or not annihilates but negates the foreignness of the other—in the other or in the self.

Correspondingly, we can think here of the finding in the Final Report of the Holmes Commission on Racial Equality in American Psychoanalysis that "analysts may tend to reinterpret experiences with racism as something else (such as birth order)" (2023, p. 16). Another related argument is Donald Moss's (2021) assertion that Whiteness is a way of being as well as a way of knowing—including about the analysand's experience.

Imaginary order empathy was spoken of as something that is likely to arise from time to time when the analyst slips out of the position of the analyst. Participants stressed that it is of the utmost importance to catch oneself in the act, in what is ultimately a fantasy of believing one knows or understands something about the analysand, and to find a way—perhaps through simply "let[ting] it go" [A8], or supervision or another type of personal work—to return to listening from the position and desire

of the analyst. It is from this position that the analyst is in tune with the limits of understanding and of the non-rapport of the sexual relation.

Theme 2: "Imaginary Order Empathy Can be Helpful…IF"

While our first theme aligns fairly closely with what might be considered the Lacanian party line, our second theme is a marked departure from typical notions of Lacanian theory and practice. Participants stated that under certain circumstances, it may be beneficial for the analyst to try to understand the analysand's self-picture or conscious understanding of their experience (which themselves are in the Imaginary). In other words, although typically the analyst is listening for manifestations of the unconscious—for parapraxes, instances of negation in speech, gaps in someone's narrative, and so on—Lacanian analysts must also have a sense of the lived experience of the analysand. Such an empathy was also seen as important to assist the analyst in recognizing the shifts that occur over the course of the analysis in the analysand's self-perceptions and worldview. Interviewees made three main observations regarding the potential usefulness of Imaginary order empathy.

First, they noted that if an analysand does not feel understood at some level, the analysand might be in danger of terminating the treatment. Speaking of their own experience in psychoanalysis, Analyst 3 said,

> "if I hadn't felt that there was some kind of form of recognition of who I am and what I say and that I would see that whatever I tell them, arrives at its destination in some form. Why would I continue to go see that person? I wouldn't."

Second, although it is the role of the analyst to question the Imaginary fictions stemming from the ego, participants stressed that Imaginary order empathy has an important role in furthering the treatment especially in its early phases (and less so later on). In this regard, Analyst 6 said, "Empathy is about making the patient love you. Now, that's extremely useful—especially at the beginning—if you are considering [the development of the] transference." Empathy is a way to show love because it involves at least the appearance of recognizing or understanding someone's being, and a sort of asymmetrical love stems from an experience of being recognized and accepted. Analyst 10 referenced the beginning of

Freud's analysis with Dora, in which Freud could be said to have used Imaginary order empathy as a prerequisite intervention to help Dora enter into the analytic work of questioning her own role in her suffering.

> The first thing that Freud does as an analyst with Dora that is different from the response she had had from the other people that she presented her problems with is he demonstrated an understanding and shared the feelings. "Ah, yes, I can see why you're upset, with your father, this whole scheme with your father and Mrs. K and you know try to pawn you off to Mr. K" etc…You know basically what Freud is doing, from my perspective is, acknowledging her, showing an understanding of her self-perception, of what's happening to her, and what her relationships are with other people in the world. … And a failure to do that will probably lead to an inability of a treatment to get started. I mean, if you can't, as an analyst, be able in your mind to understand and appreciate an analysand's own Imaginary perception of who they are and where they're situated and how the world works, um, you're going to have a tough time entering into that space. Now, of course, for an analyst, that's the first move.

Third, some interviewees not only spoke about the impossibility of completely avoiding the identifications that correspond with the Imaginary but also times when the analysis could benefit from the analyst "playing" with identification. For instance, Analyst 7 said it is important to have some identification and empathic feeling when considering "the psychosexual complaint and the psychosomatic symptom" but with the understanding that results should be put under erasure.

More frequently, however, interviewees endorsed the idea that Imaginary order empathy can be helpful and even crucial to the progression of the analysis if *the analyst makes use of Imaginary order empathy in the spirit of playfulness, and from the position of the analyst on the Symbolic axis.* In this stance, the analyst plays with the semblant or appearance of being a master figure who understands. In other words, Imaginary order empathy can be helpful when the analyst holds it under suspicion, not believing that it is the whole truth. In this spirit, participants spoke about a variety of instances in which the analyst might use cognitive empathy to hypothesize that the analysand is in a state of emotional

overwhelm but without experiencing emotional empathy. From this stance, participants said they might go on to demonstrate that empathy in some way; for example through a gesture such as pointing to a Kleenex box and telling a sobbing analysand to "take a deep break and talk" (Analyst 5), by avoiding intervening too aggressively, or even by providing "validation" (Analyst 8) in the service of facilitating the analysand to return to the work of analysis—the talking cure which hinges upon speech. As Analyst 8 put it, when analysands "reach a very deep level of despair" and have trouble speaking (and thus in doing the work of analysis), some empathic validation might help them return to speech: "It's performance, performance, empathy, based on the understanding that the other will think that I have gotten something about what they said, even though I might not have."

Theme 3: Empathy as Part of the Position of the Analyst: RSI

Not only did participants speak about practicing Imaginary order empathy from the position of the analyst on the Symbolic axis, but they also considered ways in which the practice of empathy could be seen as a part of the position of the analyst in a broader sense.

Patients feel empathized with as a result of the analyst taking up the ethics of listening well

First, participants noted that their analysands are likely to feel empathized with on account of the careful, attentive listening on the part of the analyst that is "not from a position of detachment" (Analyst 1). This capacity to listen was spoken of as central to the process of Lacanian psychoanalysis. For instance, the analysand might feel understood as a result of the analyst demonstrating that they remember what the analysand has said. Analyst 4 said,

> "I get that sense from my analysands that I'm seen as an empathic listener, an active listener, someone who really wants to know, and someone who wants to hear. It's not just wanting to know, it's being heard…And I think they experience that as empathy."

Similarly, Analyst 7 remarked,

> "[My analysands] would say, that they feel heard, or they feel seen and that that would amount to them to empathy, but that, I think, you know, it's about the very very close listening that we do. [Laughs] And so, I think that they would leave and say, "This person has amazing empathy." But,

you know, again, I think there's something about it being clinical know-how and the very, very careful listening that we do. So, it's funny because there's a confusion of tongues there a bit."

Numerous psychotherapy outcome studies include feeling empathized with as one of the essential ingredients of a successful treatment (e.g., Elliott, Bohart, & Greenberg, 2011), but it may be that a number of factors unrelated to the practice of empathy can lead in each individual case to feeling or not feeling that one's therapist empathizes with one's experience. In psychoanalysis, of course, one of those factors is an individual's transference to their analyst.

Empathy for the logical moments of the structure of analysis

Emphasizing the crucial importance of the experience of having undergone one's own analysis, interviewees identified an empathy that involves knowing something about the logical moments of the progression of an analysis. This is to say that there is a certain structural "logic" to the commonalities inherent in the analytic process, for instance beginning with the demand for analysis arising from a place of suffering, and that what varies within that structure is each particular analysand's lived experience of their suffering that motivates their request for analytic treatment. In Analyst 4's words,

> "I think we're really welcoming people to go through these different logical, what I call logical moments, which are difficult. That's the centrality of empathy, is that capacity to recognize how powerful it is, the moment of the demand, if you will. But also knowing that there's no guarantees about what will come of that."

Insofar as Lacanian analysis is attuned in many ways to structure (e.g., diagnostic structure and structural linguistics), we might think of this as empathy for the general structure of the experience of analysis—one that co-occurs alongside the respect for the singularity of each analysand and does not fall into the Imaginary trap of comparing and contrasting one's own analysis with that of each analysand. This empathy in the Symbolic order involves seeing the other in their suffering and a willingness to accompany them into what Analyst 1 called the "delicate and sometimes dark places" of their experience. Along those lines, Analyst 2 remarked, "Radically accepting the analysand's struggle with entering castration, that requires, that itself is empathy." In other words, it is part of what it means to occupy the

position of the analyst to empathize with the analysand's difficulties with facing their lack and

relinquishing the jouissance associated with their symptomatic suffering.

Analyst 7 even spoke of empathy in the Symbolic as potentially involving

> "an identification with something about the process of analysis, the intensity of it, the difficulty of
> it, what allowing yourself to really be in the position of the object for the patient and the range,
> especially after many years of practicing, the range of what patients do or bring about you, that
> becomes really important in terms of my, I don't know, like, strength [Laughter] to keep going. And
> I don't know, it's an empathy with the person who's committed to analysis and to, you know, to
> this psychoanalysis business."

Negative Empathy

Perhaps even more centrally, participants said that the stance of the analyst in Lacanian

psychoanalysis could itself be seen to involve a type of empathy, though not in any traditional sense. It is,

for one thing, "a kind of empathy that incorporates the idea of the other in their singularity" (A1). In

Analyst 4's words,

> "it gets short shrift and we kind of poo poo it in our practices, Lacanians, but I think that it's
> fundamental to our work, that at some level, you know, the capacity to understand the singularity
> of suffering for the speaking being, and that each of us is kind of living in our own body, which is
> singular, but is organized through speech, language, trauma."

Similarly, empathy operating within the discourse of the analyst is an empathy that "wants to, tries to,

aspires to be based on difference and hold up some relationship to psychoanalytic therapy of whatever

modality, which is to really kind of understand someone in their difference" (A7). Rather than flattening

the analysand's difference through the lens of the Imaginary, of what the analyst thinks they might

understand based on their own experience, empathy from the position of the analyst involves "an

openness to the not knowing … Empathy is grounded in a kind of humility" (A4) or a "knowledge about

the not knowing" (A4) which results from the crucially important experience of the personal analysis.

Undergoing one's own analysis allows for a transformation of what Lacan calls our passion for ignorance,

which, alongside love and hate is one of the three primary passions. This transformation results in an acceptance of the limits of understanding alongside a desire to know. This desire to know welcomes "something radical that is not known by the analyst nor by the analysand, which is the unconscious itself" (A4). Participants' responses corresponded to key components of what the first author calls "negative empathy" (redacted, *in press*).

We might say that aiming for negative empathy is part of what Lacanians understand to be the desire of the analyst. Via negative empathy, the analyst has a desire to uncover, reveal, or punctuate something of a particular analysand's experience that the analyst registers as potentially important yet knows cannot be fully understood—neither by the analyst nor by the analysand. The practice of negative empathy can thus be aimed toward each register of the analysand's experience: Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real. For instance, Analyst 11 discussed repeatedly scanding or ending a session during a moment in which s/he empathically sensed the analysand was experiencing some symptomatic jouissance or satisfaction—a jouissance that was unavowed by the analysand himself. In so doing, s/he was attempting to cut or disrupt the analysand's symptomatic jouissance which itself stems from the analysand's Real or lack, was intertwined in the Symbolic with a certain structure or pattern of signification, and had a certain appearance in the Imaginary (e.g., a smirk, crocodile tears, the analysand claiming to understand something perfectly, etc.). In its attunement towards the Real, Symbolic, and Imaginary, negative empathy can be said to be woven into analytic practice itself.

Theme 4: "Real order empathy"

Interviewees highlighted what we might think of as negative empathy aimed at the Real, or a wanting to know but knowing you can't know the impossible while at the same time understanding at some level that something of the Real is operating. Real order empathy stems from the desire of the analyst and guides the analyst's way of listening and intervening with each particular analysand. In other words, real order empathy is a subtype of negative empathy. Participants discussed two ways of conceptualizing Real order empathy. In its first sense, Real order empathy involves an intuitive experience that occurs when the analyst has an embodied sense or potentially a dream (about an

analysand) that something important is going on that goes beyond what is possible to put into words. This dream or embodied experience of the analyst is interpreted by the analyst as a response to something of the Real of the analysand. This experience could be qualified as countertransferential. In this vein, Analyst 3 remarked,

> "I know that in the Lacanian field, the notion of countertransference is so—it's completely rejected. But I think that that also means to sort of throw out the baby with the bathwater. And that, you know, we should pay attention to what's happening in our own unconscious, if we can. Because it might be very useful, and precisely not of the Imaginary order."

This stance from Analyst 3 and several others was surprising given that countertransference is a term Lacan disliked; Lacan viewed it as stemming from the Imaginary of the analyst and thus potentially obstructing the treatment if the analyst should mistake it as information about the analysand. Instead, study participants said that their empathy in the Real order was not about their own personal reactions to the analysand. Analyst 1 spoke of empathy in the Real as potentially involving

> when you know, something happens and it unsettles me. The unsettlement can happen on both sides… so yeah, that's what I come back to, it's just the idea that an empathy of the Real of the body to body being of this strange, of these strange moments of transmission of something that's beyond either of the two parties working on X or Y.

Analyst 3 provided an example of Real order empathy that corresponded to having dreamt about an analysand, which s/he said was an unusual experience for her/him:

> What mattered in the dream were some signifiers that had to do with his name and his father's name …What I learned was, I mean, coming back to Freud's early notion for which he was also criticized very much, you know, that I mean, the unconscious is timeless, is a timeless register so that we can anticipate at some moments we, you know, things that patient may end up doing and that's what happened in the dream….The death of the subject which was configured in the dream. And, you know, it had to do with the, the analyst's fall from this position of the subject supposed to know. So, in that sense, it was a lesson to me. And it was an indication of how to position

myself in the treatment, in a kind of a reminder. And that was enigmatic and interesting. And if you want is a form of empathy [laughing], because it's a form of the unconscious reading the situation that has not yet revealed itself as such.

The second type of Real order empathy—which may on occasion be intertwined with the first—is when negative empathy is directed to something that is presented at the level of the analysand's body, or movements, or—in one example, literally an object that the analysand brings to sessions. At times, this sense of Real order empathy can correspond to the typical way in which Lacanian analysts are attuned to irruptions of or the traces of the Real and attempt to get the analysand to signify them. Analyst 1 provided an example:

> This is a woman who for years, when she came to work with me, she brought a cup of coffee with her. And she, I can't even remember her ever drinking the coffee, she put it down on the coffee table, and then she'd set about the work…It was with us for years. I stopped seeing it even, and there was a point where she wanted to change her job. And…because she was really kind of floundering around what it was she wanted to do [I asked] "And what would be important to you?" And she said, "that there's a coffee shop nearby." And again, there's just this moment of, I must have just glanced at the coffee table, and it just came out of my mouth. I said, "How near?" She said preferably in the same building, preferably down the hall. And then she brought in a dream after that session, in which she hears her father coughing down the hall. And in that session, I remember saying, "coffee, he coughed, ee". And I didn't, I wasn't planning on it. I had no idea what it might connect to for her and she spun around and sat up and looked at me like what, and again, that was a really, really crucial moment…So at some level the coffee cup had registered over and over again, and another part of me, I was just completely stupid about it.

Discussion

We embarked upon this study to learn how the practice of Lacanian psychoanalysis involves or avoids empathizing with the analysand. Because the Lacanian psychoanalysts we interviewed primarily referenced the analyst's discourse—speaking by comparison about the master's discourse—we used

Lacanian discourse theory as the theoretical perspective for our thematic analysis. Using the discourse of the analyst as their framework, the analysts generated theoretical perspectives on empathy that differed in accordance with the analyst's position in the treatment on the Imaginary versus the Symbolic axis. Further, all participants gave clinical examples exploring the role of empathy in Lacanian psychoanalysis.

As expected, participants remarked that when an analyst believes s/he is understanding (cognitive empathy) or feeling her- or himself (emotional empathy) something akin to the analysand's experience, the analyst produces an S2 rather than keeping it under the bar and thus slips into relating on the Imaginary axis in the discourse of the master, which Lacan notes is easy to do (2007, p. 69). That being said, participants also used Lacanian theory to generate ideas about how empathy might align with the analyst's discourse and moreover already be something they themselves were practicing without signifying it as such. In this sense, interviewees spoke of a desire to know something about the Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real of a particular analysand while at the same time accepting the non-rapport and the limits of understanding. This desire corresponds to what the first author calls "negative empathy" (redacted, *in press*), which is a component of the analyst's desire, and its products would be narratives (S2) that are put under question but could potentially be used to inform interventions. The use of empathy from the analyst's position on the Symbolic axis is a novel idea within the practice of Lacanian psychoanalysis and has the potential to shape its practice. What is more, our findings bring Lacanian psychoanalysis into conversation with the existing rich theoretical literature in other analytic traditions.

Our study is the first to focus on empathy in psychoanalysis empirically rather than theoretically. We hope that empirical research into how empathy is practiced will be produced in other theoretical traditions in order to be in a more informed position from which to make comparisons. It should be noted that the analysts we interviewed did not note significant differences in the role of empathy in psychodynamic psychotherapy versus in psychoanalysis or in technology-mediated versus in-person sessions. A shortcoming of our study is that its descriptions of the ways in which empathy is employed in Lacanian psychoanalysis and the aims of that empathy not confirmed by analysands. In order to address this limitation, we conducted a subsequent research study: an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

based on our interviews of analysands' experiences of receiving empathy; this method enabled exploration of the lived experiences of receiving or not receiving empathy and its effects on the progress of psychoanalysis. Further research should consider the ways in which the practice of negative empathy might differ in accordance with an analysand's diagnostic structure.

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Fig. 1:

$$\begin{array}{ccc} \text{agent} & \rightarrow & \text{other} \\ \hline \text{truth} & & \text{product} \end{array}$$

Fig. 2: $\dfrac{S_1}{\$} \rightarrow \dfrac{S_2}{a}$ //

Fig. 3: $\dfrac{S_2}{S_1} \rightarrow \dfrac{a}{\$}$

Fig. 4: $\dfrac{\$}{a} \rightarrow \dfrac{S_1}{S_2}$

Fig. 5: $\dfrac{a}{S_2} \rightarrow \dfrac{\$}{S_1}$