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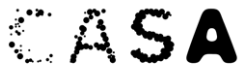
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Everyday Life and Social Death among Youth: The Meaning of Empathy, Moments of Silence, and Daydreams

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Abstract: *During two years of fieldwork among Norwegian inner-city youths, I observed that self-preservation was the dominant factor in their interactions with teachers, activity leaders, one another, and their natural surroundings. I found that the context in which this 'role playing' occurred consisted of moments often embodied in non-verbal encounters and moods signaling uncertainty, fear, anger, care, and grief. These encounters involved physiological and sensory communication that may shed light on youths' understanding of group affiliation, hope, expectations, and dreams in the present and for the future. But how can we understand these youths without narrowing the potential for interpretation? Empathy is an intersubjective experience in which one takes on another's perspective (Hollan and Throop 2008). Empathic insight lays the groundwork for understanding why youth feel anger or fear, rather than merely recognizing that these feelings are expressed.*

Keywords: *person-centered ethnography; empathy; social death; youthhood*

This article highlights the analytical processes that can facilitate an interpretation of observed emotions. When I assembled verbal and non-verbal communication and moods over time and from different contexts, some clear expressions emerged. These were not just about a shared anxiety or fear, but also a yearning. The fear was one of exclusion related to not being able to master new activities or to breaking behavioral norms. At the same time, the youths expressed a longing to escape the moral claims of society and their peers. Using a psychological-oriented anthropological framework, I conceptualize the youths' shared emotional

landscape: social death, a fear and longing for solitude. I argue that person-centered ethnography combined with a psychological approach is crucial for gaining insights in otherwise hidden aspects of the interlocutor's life.

This research highlights empathy as an area for anthropological research and underscores the need for a broader understanding of 'thick descriptions' (Geertz 1973) that includes the research subjects' thoughts, dreams, and moods. Thus, we can discern empirical patterns in not only the substantive, but also the unspoken communication that affects interactions and meaning-making.

Hollan and Throop (2011a) maintained that empathy must be studied in a broad context in which people acquire knowledge of others and reveal, permit, or conceal knowledge of themselves. Therefore, empathy cannot be understood through *one* simple meeting or *one* dialogue in a given context, but rather, must be studied over time and in a variety of contextual settings (Hollan 2012; Hollan and Throop 2008; Zahavi and Overgaard 2012). Thick descriptions of non-verbal moods, thoughts, and dreams enrich research on empathy and can be understood through shared (field) experiences. Thick descriptions give the reader the opportunity to share the already experienced from a theoretically informed position that can explain them. Through psychologically-oriented anthropology and poetic depictions of thoughts, dreams, and moods, the reader encounters experienced dimensions of life that often remain invisible from a social anthropological conceptual apparatus.

In *The Power of Feelings,* Nancy Chodorow (1999) argued that all studies on human existence in the world can be based first and foremost on emotional expression. She called into question the differentiation between emotional and rational behavior and held that emotions are the driving force behind both aggressive and caring actions. Actions relate to cultural values expressed via norms and rules, which are thought to be closely related to shared emotions. The expression of emotions through actions forms the basis for both society's and the individual's moral judgements (Lien 1991).

In psychology, research on empathy has advanced with, among other things, the measurement of 'mirror neurons', which are activated with the experience of empathy (Decety 2012; Hollan and Throop 2011b), thus enabling concrete, quantifiable research on emotions. However, in anthropology, empathy remains unexplored, dismissed by some as mere mind-reading and intangible guesswork, despite more recent research indicating that empathy can be key to important, fundamental insights into interpersonal understanding (as Decety and Ickes, Goldie and Goldman are cited in Zahavi and Overgaard 2012; Stodulka 2015). In this article, I explore the utility of understanding the intersection between cultural-emotional control and the individual's emotional reactions.

Studies on empathy in anthropology primarily focus on encounters between fieldworkers and informants (Briggs 2008; Davies and Spencer 2010; Grønseth and Davis 2010; Nuttall 2018; Wikan 1992, 1990, 2012, 1995). Subsequently, these studies have provided insight into empathy as a methodological tool, as the fieldworker's sensibility contributes to the need for empathic skills in order to secure successful intersubjective encounters and research results (von Poser 2011, 173; Wikan 2012). Conversely, studies on empathic experiences among informants are few and far between.

Therefore, the article will first provide a discussion of empathy and resonance, then illuminate on person centered ethnography before I will explore informants' unspoken, interpersonal emotions and moods, drawing upon three empirical vignettes that depict youths' empathetic relations and experiences of silence. This strategy affords insight into how urban youth maneuver their own and others' emotional reactions and experiences in Norwegian outdoor life. Taken from different contexts over time, the vignettes underscore the main argument of this article: Prolonged person-centered fieldwork focusing on empathy can yield new insights.

Through the vignettes, we learn the different ways in which the youths expressed their emotions and how emotions were made visible verbally, physically, and through moods. The first vignette includes encounters in which empathy between students played out and highlights how failed empathy can illuminate group identity and the fear of social death. The second and third vignettes provide a contrast to this fear of social death, showing that experiences of silence reveal youths' yearning for remoteness. Norwegian outdoor life offers both a space for actualization of the imminent risk of social death and for an escape from this danger. To conclude, I argue that person-centered ethnography can elicit how adolescents express their relationship to social death in their multifaceted communication, interactions, and experiences of silence.

Empathy and the concept's absence in anthropology

Empathy as a concept and methodology is more or less absent in anthropological research, but in prolonged person-centered fieldwork, it can be a means to describe individuals' experiences and reduce the risk of the researcher's over-involvement. Empathy is often defined as a person's ability to intuitively take on another's feelings, an instance in which the empathizer fully renounces ego in deference to another person's perception of the world (see Lien 1991). According to this definition, empathy requires stepping away from the self and becoming infused with another person's experience; therefore, this understanding lends itself

to critiques of projection and mind-reading on the part of the empathizer. To some, this identification with another's feelings is not empathy, but sympathy or compassion. Instead, empathy requires maintaining a distinction between oneself and the other person. As with investigations of daydreams and fantasies, research on empathy has not been a priority because these themes have been considered unobservable and unempirical (Zittoun & Gillespie 2015: 135).

The psychiatrist and philosopher Halpern (as cited in Hollan and Throop 2011b) defined empathy as the ability to be moved by another's experiences, to find correspondences with one's own, and at the same time to try to imagine the situation from another's perspective. Wikan (1992, 1990, 2012) called this ability 'resonance', which occurred when she shared moments of close understanding with her informants, situations that Hastrup (1995) later defined as 'raw moments'. Therefore, empathy can be characterized as a form of logic by which a person finds emotional resonance with another's experiences and at the same time tries to take the other person's perspective. Understanding is both an emotional and a cognitive process, and thus, the emotional and the experience-based physiological parts of the response guide the context in which the empathizer can imagine (cognitively) the other's experience. The process resembles the manner in which emotions seem to lead and link images, thoughts, and beliefs as if in a dream (Hollan and Throop 2011b, 2). Thus, I argue that resonance paves the way to empathy in some measure, allowing an understanding based on one's own experiences and feelings; yet, empathy goes a step further and takes on another's perspective to a greater degree.

As the first anthropologist to use the concept of resonance and to connect it closely with empathy, Wikan (1990) made the concepts realistic and understandable. In addition, Wikan (2012) deliberated on the danger of over-resonance, a challenge that persists.

The risk of over-connection, misfired empathy, or projection is real among researchers. Geertz (1973) was explicit in his criticism of ethnographic research concerned with empathy and other psychological topics. He argued that those who believe they have empathic abilities are simply projecting their own thoughts and feelings onto their subjects. If Geertz is right, ethnographers both misrepresent and misunderstand our informants in the research process.

In her person-centered fieldwork among the Balinese in the late 1980s, however, Wikan (1990) countered Geertz's claims, demonstrating that emotions exist to a very great extent among her interlocutors. Geertz had claimed that the Balinese express a lack of emotion, with the exception of stage fright. Wikan's study indicated that research focusing exclusively on culture as a system of meaning can be just as problematic as that focusing on empathy. Nevertheless, Geertz's

uncompromising stance and the influence of his arguments put a damper on anthropological discourse on empathy for many years (Hollan and Throop 2011b).

Distinguishing between empathy and projection, Hollan (2008) noted that empathy includes an intersubjective dialogue in which individuals seek not only to understand, but also to be understood. In contrast, projection occurs when a person transfers feelings or ideas onto another without considering whether the feelings indeed correspond with the others.

My view aligns with Wikan (2012) and Hollan (2012), who promote empathy as a temporal intersubjective experience (see also Throop 2010). Our task as anthropologists is to experience, observe, and understand not only the contexts in which empathy transpires and is valued, but also those in which empathic connection is not valued and/or ill-intentioned (Hollan and Throop 2011a; Throop 2010). In the next section, I describe fieldwork as an ideal way to broach some of Geertz's criticisms and to address concerns about the pitfalls of over-empathizing and misinterpretation.

Prolonged person-centered fieldwork

A quest to understand meaning-making requires insight into how humans affect their surroundings, how the surrounding environment affects people (Navaro-Yashin 2009), and how people affect one another. Such insight can be reached through long-term fieldwork, which reveals what is important in certain people's daily lives (Gulløv and Højlund 2003; Wadel 1991), a criterium for any study on empathy (see for example Jackson 2004; Jenkins 2015; Wikan 1990).

I argue that thick descriptions are not sufficient if we are to capture empathic relations, but person-centered ethnography is an important step forward. Robert Le Vine (as cited in Hollan 2001) defined person-centered ethnography as an anthropological attempt to describe and analyze human actions, subjective experiences, and psychological processes. Primarily focusing on the individual, person-centered ethnography reveals how individual psychology and subjective experiences both create and are created by social and cultural processes, unlike a focus on the generalized person. The goal is to (re)present human actions and subjective experiences from the informant's perspective. Person-centered ethnography may include studies on conspicuous feelings and motivational forces as they are presented in the cultural community through belief and symbolic expression (rather than assuming that such forces exist through theoretical reasoning alone). The objective is to obtain realistic depictions of experience without unnecessary analysis based on theoretical constructions distanced from that experience.

The following vignettes paint a picture of my fieldwork with youths over two years at Mimo, an outdoor recreation center that offers free activities for children and youth in a Norwegian city neighborhood. Through citywide school collaboration, the center offers evening groups for youth and vacation camps with the goal of equalizing opportunities and experiences. Schools apply for the collaboration, and evening groups are organized at the request of youths who want to participate. According to school curriculum and white papers (Miljødepartementet 2016; Utdanningsdirektoratet 2016), the program's main goal is to contribute cultural understanding, inclusion, and integration through voluntary outdoor activities. I participated in a youth group one evening every other week for one year, before undertaking one intense year in which I followed several tour groups and school trips regularly. In addition to these activities, I joined holiday camps, weekend trips, and a number of gatherings with students beyond the center's parameters.

In this article, I draw from experiences with students in a specific 10th grade, the A-class, over a year's time. Once a month, these youths participated in a day of outdoor activities through Mimo during regular school hours. Participation was obligatory for these students, unlike for the evening group and holiday/weekend camps which were based on voluntary interests. The students in the A-class came from all parts of the city. They had been taken out of their regular classes and gathered here, the reason being that they were not "functioning well" in their former classes. Many of the students knew each other well and hung out in their spare time. They all knew their class was nicknamed "the problem-class" among other students at their current school.[1] They were known for their rough tone and body-language.

Although my initial impression changed over time, the A-class students stood out considerably from other Mimo participants at the first meeting: Their body language was aggressively charged, and they seemed indifferent and dismissive towards the teachers, leaders, and the activities. Although other Mimo participants also could be negative, the A-class expressed the greatest resistance to the activities, to wearing the clothes and gear available in Mimo's equipment storehouse, and to participating during rainy, cold weather. They expressed their feelings more emphatically, more audibly, and more frequently. Every meeting with the A-class students became thoroughly emotional. The emotion strain was verified by activity leaders, who expressed the importance of interacting with these students in spite of the psychological stress and emotional challenge. The activities were possibly equally emotional for the students; most activities as well as visited landscapes were new to them. It was a must to have background

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[1] There were several «A-classes», this particular one does not exist anymore.

knowledge of other Mimo youth in understanding the A-class behavior and vice versa. As a researcher, my role depended on the groups, however, the A-class students considered me a Mimo assistant.

For me, the A-class students became a little gang of extraordinary youths, providing insight into a demanding developmental phase of life. Many of whom had complicated relations at home and thus became attached to their trusted teachers who to a certain degree represented contextually security and stability. Their teachers appeared to meet youth culture and the specific students with a balance of strictness and coolness. That is their relation was not based on care through touch or comfort talk, but handshakes and youth jargon with appropriate modification. This comportment seemed appreciated, however interactional turbulence between teachers and the A-class students hampered their communication. Jenkins (2015: 2) noted that struggle is a part of day-to-day human existence, and is "… embedded in the often profound and even courageous social engagement with living." In her book, *Extraordinary Conditions*, Jenkins (2015) showed how the extraordinary illuminates the ordinary from which it springs. Thus, my experiences with the A-class students enlightened my understanding of the other youths I encountered during my fieldwork. Importantly, the stories of the A-class students added nuance to what it means to grow up, to be young, and to encounter new surroundings that may feel unsafe.

Empathy; but what brings about resonance?

In the following two-part vignette, my field notes describe related incidents in which the A-class students were preparing for two ski excursions, one cross-country and one downhill. These trips were new experiences for the youths and triggered feelings of anxiety. As we seek to understand what resonated with them, this vignette focuses on the empathy that played out among the A-class students.

> *Alex refuses to put on skiwear for a cross-country ski trip; he will not wear those stupid clothes and the cross-country skis are a wipeout. Similarly, David, who always gets dressed and participates in Mimo activities, suddenly shows difficulty donning the skiwear when we are on our way to the Winter Park to practice downhill skiing. [This time,] he appears depressed, his shoulders sunken, and his speech turns aggressive for the first time this school year, from what I have noticed.*
>
> *However, the interesting thing is how the A-class students treat each other: When Alex refuses to join the cross-country ski trip and marches out of the Mimo equipment storehouse in protest, Chris, a fellow student, follows him. Chris*

*touches Alex amicably on the shoulder, 'Hey, join us. We'll bounce if it's not cool.'
'Hey, look at those shoes, idiot! We can't bounce anywhere with them, ya know.'*

David approaches them and stops beside Alex; they discuss the situation back and forth. After a while, David and Chris, who have decided to join the downhill skiing excursion slowly withdraw from the situation, leaving Alex to himself in silence. Later, Alex walks down to the subway with us. He is not intending to take the same train, but he is there. While waiting for the subway, Chris states that he would have joined Alex if he had not [already] had his boots on. 'Damn ski boots, urgh!' He kicks into the thin air.

Prior to the downhill ski excursion to the winter park, Alex finishes changing into winter gear first: 'Look at me! I look like a snowman!' he cries cheerfully. He tries to remonstrate with David who [this time] sits alone in a corner of the equipment room. 'C'mon!' Alex says, touching his classmate slightly, then calmly withdraws when David does not respond to his touch. An activity leader then has a go. He knows David's parents and speaks the same language. I can't understand the words used, but I recognize his father's name when mentioned. After a lot of hemming and hawing, David sits in a chair with his head bowed, staring at the floor, dressed in Mimo gear. The slalom boots, placed in the floor before him, remain untouched.

Something hurts inside me; how can I get him to join in? He is always positive; he always joins in. What is wrong now? I get down on my haunches and try to make eye contact. 'Hmmm, I think I can see what size you take', I say softly. If I try to make light of it all, ignore everything that has happened before, will he also be able to put it behind him? 'Let me see! I can help you. These boots can be very difficult to put on; they are so incredibly tight.' He looks up at me; his gaze is not angry; it is empty, perhaps sad. I pick up a slalom ski boot, at the same time taking his shoe in hand to compare it to the boot. He retorts, 'For God's sake! I'm outta here'. He takes all the clothes off again, throwing them in a pile on the floor. The Mimo leader that had persuaded him to dress tries again, but this time, no (magic) words are going to make a difference. David pushes open the door with a shove and disappears.

Was it me? Would this have happened regardless? The words of his classmates, Nora and Lea, echo in my head. On several occasions they have commented on such situations: 'When someone has decided not to participate, then they should just be allowed to leave—there's nothing to be done'. (Field notes, February 2015)

Like Wikan (1995), I recognized in these incidents that meaning often was exchanged non-verbally, especially when something was at stake. Wikan (1995) elaborated that focusing on verbal exchanges as the gateway to individuals' inner

lives is too easy an approach. We may need more information, which may be more difficult to grasp. In situations in which silence conveys more than words possibly can, we must strive for understanding (see Jackson 2004; Stevenson 2014).

Moreover, Wikan (1995) argued that the ungraspable often appears and feels strongest in situations in which the self is in danger. This hypothesis haunted me in many situations in the field. Something hung in the balance, but what? How can we understand the manner in which Chris carefully touched his mate's shoulder? And later on, the way in which Alex put his hand on David's shoulder? What meaning lay in the careful encouragement, 'Hey, come and join in, eh'? What was hidden or concealed (from me) in the calm, careful withdrawal from situations in which classmates did not respond positively to the encouragement they received?

Often, I detected tension in the air: uncertainty, nervousness, compassion, and something sad. Was it grief for not joining in or fear of a loss of face—grief that must be concealed behind aggression or silent withdrawal maneuvers? The girls and boys who were present recognized the mood; the few students in the A-class knew each other and shared cultural models (Shore 1996). They understood the messages circulating in the air. Resistance and perhaps even despair could be heard in David's voice; words were one thing, but no one challenged the silence that emerged. No one tried to do anything about it.

These were not isolated incidents. Something I could not grasp created the youths' silence and mood—something the youths understood and respected. Silence was prominent in other contexts, too: When a student did not want to use the trampoline, no one asked why. No one tried to pull Lea out onto the ice to play curling; she stopped talking and made herself 'invisible' on a bench at the far end of the rink. When Alex got uppity because he did not want to wear Mimo gear, no one questioned him; instead, in the most fleeting of moments, he received a light hand on his shoulder. On the next occasion, he put on Mimo gear, and no one commented about the previous episode—it was out of the question. When David dropped out of alpine skiing, angrier than usual, no one tried to change his mind or calm him down. He kept up the silence. No words were needed; the A-class students knew the code.

I understand it now, looking back

To achieve deeper understanding, a researcher must look beyond the directly observable and create structured contexts for meaning and interpretation (Wikan 1995; Zahavi and Overgaard 2012). Revisiting Geertz, I note the important of the hermeneutical circle that emerges in the writing process. Although he would not even have thought to highlight the researcher's emotional or experimental

reactions involved in working on a text, Geertz promoted a hermeneutical point from which the researcher swings back and forth between perspectives of near and distant experience (Hollan and Throop 2008: 396). Writing about these experiences with the A-class, as I went back and forth between theory and data, I developed an empathic understanding of my own misunderstanding of the situations with the youths.

As I first reviewed my field notes, I realized that perhaps as a mother of two small children, my maternal instinct had been mobilized when I encountered the A-class youths. My wish—perhaps my need—to be valued as a caring person got on a young man's nerves. He did not want my caring—not at all. However, during my time in the field, several other adults also found that their empathy misfired or was unwelcome. When an instructor offered a helping hand to a student on the trampoline, the youth stiffened and withdrew from the equipment. An activity leader ran after students who refused to participate, showing concern and explaining that the activity was not dangerous, but her efforts were coldly rejected with rude gestures. A teacher explained, 'There's no point. They don't join in with things that are unfamiliar. That is the threshold for them, it is so difficult to cross over'. But did he know why? Good intentions and goodwill are not always enough when we lack competence in the local cultural or sufficient knowledge of the individuals involved (Hollan 2012).

In retrospect, I understand more about how the A-class youth did not respond positively to a helping hand and a sympathetic word from an adult. The A-class youth were of one mind that each individual should be free to decide if he or she wants to do something and when enough is enough. Although the youths may not have always known why a fellow student became verbally aggressive or withdrew from activities, understanding all the motives behind a classmate's actions was not necessary. Empirically, I observed that the students knew the cultural rules that specifically applied to being a member of the A-class, which included understanding how emotions could and should be expressed. Caring, friendship, and respect could be expressed through subtle signs, but not necessarily by individuals on the periphery or who were not members of the in-group. What could seem to be indecipherable signals—moods, silence, and touch—acquired new meaning through understanding of the role of empathy in the youths' interactions.

Empathy and group affiliation

Newman and Newman (2001: 516) asserted that the formation of and desire to be affiliated with a group can constitute a "critical formation of experience during early adolescence." Group identity springs from a notion of shared experiences

and common norms, values, and moral principles. Ideally, such emotionology, or common emotional management, creates security among group members, a security that "guarantees predictability for individuals as to who they can expect to provide material and social help and support from in different contexts" (Lien 1991: 101). In this way, the group is maintained and strengthened as a whole (Echols and Correll 2012).

Clinical studies show that recognition of emotions indicated through facial expressions is based on stereotypes and group affiliation (Echols and Correll, 2012; Lewis and Hodges, 2012). According to Lewis and Hodges (2012), the key to the study of empathy is situated here, and thus empathy is released from its magical connotations. The intangible can now be grasped.

We cannot gain deeper insight and understanding of others without knowledge of them, and knowledge is acquired partly through group affiliation. Over time we establish behavioral schemas for people with whom we associate. These schemas help us to anticipate and understand the actions and emotions that arise in different interaction constellations. Therefore, prolonged fieldwork necessitates an understanding of how cultural and psychological factors are interwoven at the individual level (see Parish 2008). According to Jenkins (2015: 103), we should not view emotions as abstract cultural systems, but seek to understand the meaning behind emotional experiences through insight into the positions individuals hold in a web of social relations. In keeping with these viewpoints, Jackson offered arguments for how anthropologists should meet and write about vulnerability in the field:

> *Coexisting with the subject of one's concern, sustaining an engagement over time, in his or her place, on his or her terms, and trying not to escape into consoling intellectualization, sympathetic identifications, or political actions that reduce the other to a means for advancing an academic career, or demonstrating what a compassionate person one is, or changing the world. It is an experiment in coexistence, social before it is intellectual, born of a commitment to put understanding before judgment. […] placing oneself in the situation of the other—a sustained intimate, and often silent, involvement in his or her everyday lifeworld that inevitably transforms one's own worldview, and may involve the other seeing his or her situation from a new perspective (2004: 54).*

I also experienced the need to reconsider my role in the field before I could understand how my empathic connection, understanding, and affiliation had misfired. Only over the course of time are we able to recognize and share cultural forms (Hollan 2012; Jackson 2004; Wikan 2012).

In the following vignettes, I illuminate from other angles how the A-class expressed and handled their emotions. To understand what students experienced when they were together, I needed to observe how they perceived moments of solitude.

Moments that touch

I could sleep here

Activity leaders Sigrid and Iver and I are excited and, on our way, to meet three A-class students. Two teachers guide us to a small room where two boys sit side-by-side, seemingly unconcerned, and a girl with her arm in a cast sits opposite them. One boy has a black hood pulled down over his head, covering his face. Although it is raining, they each wear jeans and thin sneakers. Trying to engage the students, Sigrid and Iver talk in a relaxed fashion about the canoe trip that lies ahead. The students are not about to get excited; no one smiles, and they tell us to look out at the pouring rain.

Samuel, the boy with the hood, refuses to participate in the excursion. Nora is uncertain, and David clearly states he wants to fish, which we shall. After a while, one teacher leaves with Samuel. David and Nora walk to the bus, where we have rainwear waiting for them. David puts on boots, rain pants, a raincoat, and a hat. Nora refuses to put on any rainwear.

Once at our destination, we bring the canoes down to the shore. Nora realizes she needs something over her thin sweater. She gets Iver's raincoat, [which] is large and even covers her thighs. 'Rain pants, just forget it a'ight', she comments. We have to balance across two boards placed on the mud-covered ground and proceed a little way into the water, before we can get into the canoes without tipping them over. Nora is afraid the canoe may capsize. Iver demonstrates how we must hold on to the edges of the canoe to get inside safely. Nora is still afraid; she says she does not want to die: 'Mother fucker, a'ight! Are you stupid or what? You think I wanna die, I don't wanna die—right!' David appears calm and reserved, but states he wants to paddle with Iver. Nora wants to share a canoe with her teacher. After several outbursts claiming that she does not want to die and that the canoe could capsize, peppered with endless 'mother fuckers', Nora sits in the canoe which slides slowly out onto the water.

There is a haze over the water, which is full of rings in motion from heavy raindrops falling close together. The temperature is lovely, and the reeds sway slightly in the gentle breeze. Right at the start we have to canoe over a tree trunk that has fallen into the water; the reeds remain dense around the canoes. Up ahead, it looks as if we must pass through a small channel before the lake

opens around us. The girl and the teacher are floating, bobbing gently along, just ahead of Sigrid and me. Iver and David are a stretch behind us. Sigrid and I hear Nora say softly, 'I could sleep here', the swearing and defiant rage gone from her voice. Everything appears relaxed, calm, and confirming. There is no visible body tension as she leans with hunched shoulders slightly forward over the oar resting in her lap. I repeat, 'Oh, yes, could you sleep here?' 'Yes', she replies, 'it's kinda … so quiet'. Raindrops dance on the water, reeds wave in a green dance, and trees bend out into the water. There is a clearing around the canoes. Not far ahead the water narrows again, but now there is plenty of room on all sides, no others are nearby. (Field notes, September 2014)

This was my first trip with the A-class, and the experience remained with me throughout the year. The topic of death never disappeared; the threat of its presence returned in every activity. A Mimo leader commented, 'There is a lot of death around', and eventually the expression became a joke among the leaders: 'There was a lot of death today as well.' My field notes record the questions: Is it just jargon? Or are they actually afraid of something? Why all this commotion about death, both humorous and serious[2]? Is the pun so effectively used because of its potential metaphorical multiplex meanings, such as "real social death" versus shame, hidden – forbidden joy?

Alone on the water, cut off from school life and other students, Nora suddenly and unexpectedly found calmness in an activity she had just expressed an aversion to. In the quiet, rocking on the waves, she said she could have slept there. What happened in this encounter between Nora, the water, the silence, and us three adults who heard her words and shared the tranquility with her? I had an insight six months later when another such temporal state was awakened in Nora on a ski trip to the winter park. That third vignette follows.

Am I dreaming?

A day in February 2015, we are at the bottom of the slalom children's slope at a winter park. Nora refused to bring a helmet when we left Mimo, and now Sigrid asks if she should fetch the one, she brought along for her. 'Screw that', Nora replies with a flickering glance, her body stiff. The words are harsh, but

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2   I here write on the verbalization of death connected to fear, fully aware of other occasions where the same jargon was used as an expression of empathizing or humorizing only. Also, in anxious moments humor is used, thus humor can be, and often is, quite serious (Freud 2018).

there is uncertainty in her voice. Sigrid gives me a quick glance and goes to retrieve the helmet from the Mimo van. Now Nora wants a mirror. She says she feels stupid, but the helmet is on, and we are finally on our way.

I set off with Jason, another A-class student who also wants to hit the children's slope, and before he knows it, we are on our way to the top. We calmly set off as I try to teach Jason how to make curves. He imitates me half-heartedly for a while, but quickly becomes bored. 'I've got it now', he says, and sets off to find the way down on his own.

I wait for Sigrid and Nora at the bottom of the slopes, as I see Jason on the chairlift again. Sigrid gives me a big smile when she spots me and says, 'I am happy you waited for us! Now it is just us girls'. Nora seems content, a smile lurking on her face and her eyes glittering beneath the helmet. I ask if she is having fun, and she looks down and gives a barely audible 'yes'. We set off again, and Sigrid tries to teach Nora the swing technique, but Nora is more into finding her own way, much like Jason, who passes us on our way down. Nevertheless, Nora wants us there at her side. At the steepest point, Nora wants Sigrid to ski backwards, holding onto her like she did before. When the three of us reach the chairlift again, Nora wonders how many times she has to ski downhill. Sigrid wonders if she'd rather be making toast on a campfire. I interrupt, 'Oh, no! We're going to the top again. You need to get that swing technique from Sigrid. She taught it to me, and it feels so good when you manage it'. We get into the lift again. There is no swing-turn-technique instruction on the way down, but Nora becomes better and better with each descent and soon skis the steepest part, as Sigrid refuses to help. We find ourselves in line for the lift time and again.

The dense fog hangs palpably around the chairlift. Grey clouds embrace us as far as we can see. Nora breaks the silence, 'It's sort of like I'm dreaming. When I look outward it is sort of like it is not real'. Sigrid and I exchange a glance, and I comment that the mist is like a dreamscape. 'Yes, I find this sort of like, am I really experiencing this', Nora continues. 'I came here and couldn't ski, and now I know I can do it'. Nothing else is said. (Fieldnotes, February 2015)

Emotions, time and dreams

One of a researcher's most important tasks is to know, understand, or feel when to ask questions and when to keep silent (Jackson 2004). In silence, we find answers that are often different from those words provide. Silence is filled with symbolic, aesthetic power and both idiomatic and idiosyncratic meanings. Silence that breaks with the everyday sounds is meaningful and thought-provoking, and not just for the A-class youths. In this unpremeditated escape, the temporal condition

is manifested in the form of daydreams, retrospective reflections, and hopes for the future. Thus, I interpreted Nora's encounters with silence and with herself as moments in which the past, present, and future fused together in an astonishing encounter. She experienced and found herself in a new and perhaps surprising way.

Parish noted that even small moments, such as Nora's experience in the canoe and on the slalom slope, can be impactful: "People have moments of awakening to the world and self, in which experience strikes with the force of a revelation. This may not change the course of a life, may not shatter the person's world, but still makes a difference, altering the terms of existence in some small yet decisive way" (2008: 3).

Let us hold these given moments, and let Parish help us bring some of the magic back to empathy. Perhaps through these significant moments, Nora understood herself in a new light and allowed herself to see another future. In a given moment, she dared just to 'be'. The moment will never disappear (Thorheim 2009) but will be with her ever after. Nora dared to imagine that what frightened her was somehow terrifyingly beautiful; the silence, a moment with unforeseen potential for change in which she experienced the possibilities of self (see Parish 2008).

According to Thorheim (2009), a moment can constitute a break with customary thought processes like a sudden light in the dark. In such moments, something happened to Nora, there was no sign of the unrest that could otherwise be provoked by the tranquility. Nora experienced an unusual silence, a silence that demands retrospection. Such moments make room for new expectations, new daydreams that open us to new possibilities. Experiences in nature, along with mastery and calm found in safe surroundings, appeared to be conducive to Nora's renewed sense of self and being in the world.

New possibilities beyond ordinary expectations can arise through these kinds of experiences (Zittoun and Gillespie 2015; see also Varma 2016). According to Zittoun and Gillespie: "The process of creating experience that escapes the immediate setting, which allows for exploring the past or future, present possibilities or even impossibilities. […] Imagination is a social and cultural process; the individual is the one who imagines, but it is made possible by the social and cultural artefacts; it can be socially allowed or constrained because it can have consequence" (2015: 20).

Both on the slalom slope and on the lake, Nora found herself in a landscape that allowed her to escape the consequences of her affiliation with the cultural community of the A-class, but also other everyday social norms set forth by authoritative voices that she both opposed and sometimes had to obey by. She did not need to relate to the group's collective self-presentation that was inculcated with a norm-giving emotional management. She did not need to worry, 'What if someone sees me now?' as David and Axel did. Both the social and natural surroundings

awoke a dream-like state that removed her from the associations of daily life. Emotionology, or the prescribed emotional management, disappeared and her individual and perhaps more spontaneous and uncensored emotions appeared.

For the anthropologist, a real danger lies in over-empathizing and incorrectly interpreting these events, although they simultaneously offer possible insights into what it means to be young. These moments of tranquility that stimulate dreams and hopes for the future may also explain the unrest and the fear and awareness of death that colored the interactions and emotional expressions among the A-class. For them, the unknown and the possible loss of social recognition threatened the safe and the familiar. In the following sections, I examine more closely how the youths expressed this fear of social death and what actually may have prompted their fears.

Social death, a shared fear?

"Speech is of time, silence is of eternity."
THOMAS CARLYLE, *Sartor Restartus*.

Nora carried fear in the same way as David, Alex, and the other youths I met in the field, but she also revealed moments in which she was free of that fear. At those times, she entered a liminal space (see Stallybrass & White 1986), as if momentarily released from the group's identity. My field notes indicate that the fear I detected probably revolved mostly around the shame that could arise from not being cool enough or not managing well, and the youths' fellow students recognized this fear.

Death and silence, according to Freud (Freud 2010: 183–227), are deeply embedded instincts from birth. The death instinct is a human drive towards quiescence and stillness. I wondered if the behavior I observed involved a quest to get away from everyday chaos, expectations, and demands. Why were the youths so afraid of death and at the same time seeking to go far away?

I also could have focused on an acceptable dress code, for a lot revolves around clothing in encounters among youth (Rysst 2005). Clothes are visible social markers, and both girls and boys expressed resistance to the Mimo gear that they did not consider fashionable. When participants outside the A-class referred to Mimo as a 'free place' where they could be themselves, what were they free from? More complex associations must have been at work, beyond the fact that the clothes were *ugly*, borrowed, or broke the social codes or that the youths simply did not want to wear them or did not wish to have a helmet on their heads.

A detour to Bhaktapur, Nepal may offer relevant insight. In descriptions and analyses of the Newar people, Parish described how moral norms and rules

influence individuals to the extent that fear of (social) death often arises and is discussed: "As long as you are alive you must do your rituals. The only people who don't do rituals are the dead — no one says anything to them. So, if you are alive and don't do the rituals, you are […] the same as dead. You feel that, because you know society will say that you are bad. And society won't count you as a person. And that is like being dead. Having no significance" (1994, 208).

We may ask whether the Newar peoples' fear is extraordinary, or they simply are a population who know how to describe their circumstances in words. Similarly, the Mimo youths' wordplay takes on a new meaning now and is not mere jargon. Consciously or unconsciously, they too put words to their shared emotions, the perpetual, deeply rooted fear either of not fitting in or of transgressing the group's moral requirements. As Parish beautifully noted, "a moral emotion can be a dangerous way to bind the heart" (1994: 208).

Social death

It is said that "in America nobody says you have to keep to circumstances somebody else assigns you" (Wikan 1995: 270), but what if you believe you deserve your situation? In their study on shame, Newman and Newman (2001) found that none of those interviewed described episodes leading to undeserved feelings of shame. The same applied to situations leading to a permanent loss of status without the possibility of returning to a given setting or social context; therefore, the researchers concluded, "embarrassment is a righteous reminder of the limits of our privacy and, hence, the limits of our egocentric self-concept" (Holland and Kipnis 1994: 333). To the extent that these findings speak for themselves, we can expect youths continually to make conscious or unconscious decisions concerning their participation and behavior in most situations. The possible consequence they fear is a breach of the moral rules of play, culminating in social death — a fear so deeply internalized that it guided the Mimo youths' choices even when they were alone.

Bourdieu (2003) described social death as a state outside of time, characterized by a terrible state of rest. The threat of such a silence may arise from the loss of friends with whom one identifies, spends time, and finds comfort when things go wrong. A person may be left in silence, a silence that for youths can be imagined as the end, as social death. According to Parish (1991), the threat of social death can be a dehumanization by which self-confidence and meaning disappear and the person experiences emptiness, withdrawal, and disappearance. The A-Class youths expressed their fear of loneliness, and at the same time bestowed space, rest, and silence on one another.

Hollan's (2011) research highlights a possible reason why the youths in the A-Class showed respect for their fellow classmates through silence and withdrawal. Citing studies on the Javanese (Geertz), the Balinese (Wikan), and his own experiences in South Sulawesi, Hollan demonstrated how people meet others' despair in ways that avoid consolidating it. Similarly, I observed that the Mimo youths met each other's despair and fears as they also battled their own — a strategy that demonstrates, according to Hollan (2011), considerable empathic presence. Avoidance was championed as a way to minimize shame as the individual was given space to calm down.

Most interactions and self-presentations appeared balanced in the youths' day-to-day existence, perhaps out of fear of what might happen if they lost control and made fools of themselves, and could not see any way back to their friends and/or family. The thought of being socially humiliated and excluded feeds the fear of social death. To summarize Parish (1994), Bourdieu (2003), and Holland and Kipnis (1994), social death is characterized by an overwhelming silence, a sensation of abandonment in the nakedness of the situation that will persist into the future and remain ever-present. Such a painful experience is the reason that moral emotions function as behavioral controls (Parish 1994: 215).

The students had a shared understanding: They achieved resonance with their fellow classmates through their fear of death, of being seen, of failing to manage. Even when the others were not present, they appeared to be afraid of not living up to expectations. The fear was powerful: Imagine if someone knew. The youths in the study expressed their dislike of cross-country skiing: What if you are discovered on the west-bound ski trails not being able to master the Norwegian national sport? Canoeing is *idiotic*, and rainwear is *nerdy*: What if someone knew you could not manage to paddle and had never fished before, not to mention being seen soaking wet and looking like an idiot in borrowed rainwear and boots? What if you died a social death?

I do not yet wish to leave the topic of death. Death is closely related to silence, and silence in and of itself need not be correlated either to fear or eternal death. Time does not disappear (Thorheim 2009); conversely, silence need not necessarily be eternal. Death distances us from a (social) life, but can it perhaps also lead to a new one?

Social death and broken silence

If we are distanced from the familiar, the moment can be everlasting, even if change does not occur, asserted Thorheim (2009). At such a point we meet Nora, on the brink between the fear and the desire to disappear in the moment, into

eternity, to hover or dream in the silence; to die, but also to be resurrected. Water can symbolize birth or rebirth in this way (Parish 2008). Stevenson (2014) described how Inuit youth, encountering the snowbound plateau with no sign of their current society, accommodate the longing for a bygone era. Additionally, such moments open the desire and perhaps even the hope of listening in the present in new ways.

For such expectations to surface, a particular social setting is required, one that is open to individual or collective fantasizing: "It is not enough to protect cultural elements to guarantee that people will be free to use these resources to explore alternatives. The practice of imagination requires material, social and symbolic conditions that allow for exploratory thinking and imagining" (Decety 2012: 129).

The youths who let fear get the upper hand, closing its grip around the heart, missed out on these moments. The fear was too heavy to bear. Yet, for some, the fear brought hope; the moment was not lost. I noticed that after the experience in the ski lift, Nora went on her first overnight trip with the class. To everyone's pleasant surprise, she turned up without warning with her bag on the day of departure, although she had not previously intended to go.

Conclusion

In this article I have shown how a focus on empathy and empathic encounters endow aggressive utterances and behavior, as well as expressed resistance and caring, new meaning on encounters with silence and the self. Fear, water, dreams, flight, verbal death and silent death are redolent with complex, meaningful symbolic content.

> *"A knowing look, a glance avoided, the touch of a comforting hand on a shoulder as one alternates between memories, fantasies, moments of distraction and absorption, yearning for human connection one moment, feeling that others are infringing on one's vulnerability the next — it is within the complexity of such subjective and intersubjective realities that anything that be termed 'empathy' must be emplaced"* (Throop 2010: 780).

I have focused on a few individuals, significant moments, emotions, shared fears, and caring for one another. I have attempted to show how important it is to focus on physical movements, the unspoken, and moments in which facts and words fall short (Stevenson 2014). Reluctant to focus solely on the degree of empathy or resonance between the researcher and the informant (von Poser 2011), I have preferred instead to demonstrate fragility. Like Lepowsky (2011), I argue that

many (reported) idealized meetings between researchers and informants are far from perfect, and are, to some extent, impossible. The way forward is through up-close experiences, reflexive and thick empirical descriptions, and intersubjective encounters. Whereas Lepowsky based her work on encounters between the researcher and informant, I have attempted to add another layer. For example, in some encounters between informants the researcher is irrelevant or not the central person in the interactions. Yet through empirical evidence, we can capture any uncertainty and expressed contradictions without necessarily needing to resolve them. Like Stevenson (2014), I argue for a focus on images from the field and descriptions in which not everything can be explained or understood. Such descriptions can always be drawn in different directions, with multiple interpretative possibilities. I underscore such unresolved, thick descriptions as a viable means to achieve insight and knowledge, as opposed to relying on *discursive modes of knowing*. In this way, the anthropologist can be faithful to life's paradoxes, emotions, and experiences, which often disappear from view in discursive truths or certainties (Stevenson 2014: 10).

Ethnographic imagery invites a relationship between the reader and the text, in which researchers allow their analyses to be open and vulnerable. In this way, uncertainty and paradoxes become visible, and others may take them on and build upon them. Research on youth often includes concepts of 'inclusion' and 'exclusion', which shed light on the group dynamic. As I see it, these concepts underscore the conceptual mechanisms at play, whilst emotions and individuals disappear all too easily from view. We need an approach that captures why being young can be difficult, and why the tightrope walk of youth incorporates survival strategies on several levels — including death. The aim should not be to depict *what* youths are, but *who* they are. The aim should be to create cultural understanding through empathic understanding in which the reader achieves resonance with the youths, an understanding of the unique nature of individual feelings, rather than an empathic concern borne of the need to save individuals from their situations (see Decety 2012: 56).

Therefore, empathy is not simply intuitive and universal rooted, but also narratively and culturally rooted. Empathy grows and develops over time. Sometimes distance is required, an uncluttered gaze and a moment when writing about experiences and observations permits emotions to appear in new forms, bearing novel associations. However, such insights and understanding would not be possible without directly focusing on individuals through a psychologically-oriented conceptual apparatus.

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