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## Empathy in the Contemporary Social Context

**Abstract:** Empathy is a basic component of interpersonal relationships, a complex cognitive-affective phenomenon of experiencing and understanding the conscious and unconscious states of others. The Shadow is one of the fundamental concepts of analytical psychology, crucial for defining a person's identity as well as for establishing and maintaining relationships with others. Besides the personal, we can speak of the group and collective Shadow. Understanding and integrating the contents of the group and collective Shadow can serve as indicators of qualitative and value shifts in certain social systems. The post-Jungian paradigm examines the contemporary social context, viewing the “psyche” or “soul” as something that exists “in and among people”, while considering the analyst's practice as a “revolutionary cell”, an instrument of change not only for the individual but also for the world which we live in. The postmodern discourse of contemporary society promotes and validates individuality, efficiency, achievement, acquisition, external appearance and narcissism. We live in a polarized, alienated, binary reality, in a culture that values extroversion, where the space for the liminal, processual, and transcendental is narrowing, and instead of fostering integration and dialogue, we increasingly experience fragmentation. This collective Persona implies that community, civility, care for the ecosystem, and empathy are all elements of the collective Shadow. In this paper, we will examine the concept of the Self of collectivity, various clinical as well as contextual examples of the manifestations of these contents, and the possibilities of establishing a dialogue with them.

**Keywords:** empathy; collective Shadow; individuation; contemporary society; Self of collectivity.

### Introduction

Empathy is a fundamental component of interpersonal relationships. It can be defined as a complex cognitive-affective phenomenon of experiencing and understanding the conscious and unconscious states of others.<sup>1</sup> Empathy is most often considered a relational and social component of relationships, one which is crucial for forming a stable identity of a person, as well as for establishing and maintaining a healthy and functional family, partnership, friendship, and professional relationships. We can also view empathy as a value orientation within a specific social context. Social

<sup>1</sup> Tatjana Vukosavljević-Gvozden, “Određenje pojma empatije,” *Nastava i vaspitanje* 50, no. 3–4 (2001): 391–407.

groups, organizations, and communities vary in the extent to which they value and promote altruistic behavior among their members, as well as in the degree to which they 'sanction' non-empathetic and antisocial responses from certain group members.

Various psychological theories and research suggest that altruistic traits are primarily based on an innate capacity for empathy, and on the quality of early emotional attachment which forms the foundation for developing later relationships.<sup>2</sup> Altruistic behavior can largely be adopted and learned through the process of socialization.<sup>3</sup> Research points to the significant role of parental models in shaping prosocial behavior, and more broadly, learning through modeling has a major impact on the development of altruistic behavior. The culture, social environment to which we belong, influence of media, and social networks also play a substantial role. However, most theories concerning empathy and altruism consider the relational component of empathy and human relationships. One of the core theses of our paper is that in the contemporary social context, we must, in some way, redefine the concept of empathy, to place it in a broader context that encompasses not only the social environment but also our ecosystem.

The challenges of the modern social context – globalization, climate change, wars, and migrations – bring an increasingly urgent need to change our relationship with the world around us, particularly with our ecosystem. As the authors of climate psychology state, this is “a matter of life and death”.<sup>4</sup> Climate psychology examines the psychological mechanisms that cause people to continue destructive lifestyles, with little insight, regard, or empathy, and without awareness that they are actively contributing to the onset of widespread devastation.

From various psychological and psychotherapeutic paradigms, we consider which psychological defense mechanisms are activated when facing this kind of existential anxiety. One way to understand this dynamic through the lens of analytical psychology and psychotherapy is the idea that empathy in the modern social context, particularly empathy toward nature and the environment, is part of humanity's collective Shadow.

The Shadow is one of the fundamental concepts in analytical psychology, essential for defining a person's identity and for establishing and maintaining relationships with others.<sup>5</sup> Besides the personal Shadow, we can also speak of the group, collective, and archetypal Shadow.<sup>6</sup> The contents of the Shadow are primarily instinctive and inferior, often of sexual and aggressive nature, but also include talents and potentials that have been pushed out of conscious awareness. The Shadow has an archetypal basis; it is universal, and it is a part of human nature. It is often noted that at the

<sup>2</sup> Daneil C. Batson, David A. Lishner, and Eric L. Stocks, “The Empathy-Altruism Hypothesis,” *The Oxford Handbook of Prosocial Behavior*, ed. David A. Schroeder and William G. Graziano (Oxford Academic, 2015), 259–81.

<sup>3</sup> Nikola Rot, *Osnovi socijalne psihologije* (Zavod za udžbenike i nastavna sredstva, 1983).

<sup>4</sup> Vendi Holvej, Pol Hoget, Kris Robertson, and Sali Vajntrob, *Klimatska psihologija* (Clio, 2024), 8.

<sup>5</sup> Joseph L. Henderson, *Shadow and Self-Selected Papers in Analytical Psychology* (Chiron Publications, 1990).

<sup>6</sup> Murray Stein, *Jung's Map of the Soul* (Open Court Chicago and La Salle, 1998).

core of the archetypal Shadow lies the archetype of evil.<sup>7</sup> Numerous destructive social phenomena can be interpreted as the eruption of the collective, archetypal Shadow through powerful and massive projections of negative and destructive contents onto social or ethnic groups that are perceived as inferior or hostile.

The implications of the archetypal Shadow can be recognized in various historical contexts when a particular group of people or a nation is “perceived/seen” as different and threatening, thus becoming a target of attacks, persecution, and horrific crimes. When the collective Shadow is activated, ordinary people can turn into monstrous killers, driven by powerful authorities and stripped of any personal responsibility and empathy. In the film “Downfall”,<sup>8</sup> which depicts the final days of Hitler’s reign, every scene serves as an example of the embodiment of the archetypal Shadow. The story is told from the perspective of Hitler’s secretary, Traudl Junge, a twenty-two-year-old woman who joined the National Socialists.

Throughout the film, she undergoes an internal catharsis – from being completely blinded by her pursuit of “higher goals” and projecting all evil and destructive forces onto a dehumanized enemy, to confronting the horror which she herself was also indirectly a part of. The film concludes with her saying: “All the terror I heard about at the Nuremberg Trials... six million Jews, people of other races... who died... deeply shocked me. But I did not connect it to my past. I convinced myself that I was not personally guilty of anything and that I had no knowledge of the scale of it all. But one day, I was walking past the Sophie Scholl Memorial, here on Franz Josef Street. I saw that she was my age, and only then did I realize that youth is not an excuse... and that I was capable of finding out the truth.”

Jung stated that in a crowd, the collective unconscious is activated,<sup>9</sup> individual consciousness regresses, personal responsibility is withdrawn, and there is a flooding of archetypal contents. Gustave Le Bon<sup>10</sup> similarly describes the crowd as a place where individuals sink into primitive moral and intellectual mud. Some of these regressive consequences of crowd psychology can be channeled through the presence of rituals. However, if we take away rituals, if we remove the institutions that hold significant collective meaning for the people (such as the church and the military), we also take away their focus on individual consciousness. They inevitably fall into collective unconscious processes and become susceptible to “psychological infections,” seeking a chief, a shaman, or a leader. The leader provides people with a sense of direction, as this figure represents the personified principle of taking responsibility, which opens a vast space for manipulation.

Deprived of one set of gods, people will inevitably “create” others based on their inner unconscious instincts.<sup>11</sup> When one’s country takes the place of God, subservi-

<sup>7</sup> Marie-Louise von Franz, *Shadow and Evil in Fairy Tales* (Shambhala, 1995).

<sup>8</sup> Oliver Hirschbiegel, *Der Untergang*, movie, 2004.

<sup>9</sup> Karl Gustav Jung, *O psihologiji nesvesnog* (Matica Srpska, 1978).

<sup>10</sup> Gustave Le Bon, *Psychology of Crowds* (Sparkling Book, 2009).

<sup>11</sup> Karl Gustav Jung, *Dinamika nesvesnog* (Matica Srpska, 1978).

ence to the country becomes a form of worship. Highly authoritarian and totalitarian societies, on a superficial, external level, offer some kind of earthly paradise to their followers.

Of course, the stronger the idealization at the conscious and external level, the greater the doubt and resistance at the unconscious level, which means that totalitarian states always exist on the brink of rebellion and the prevalence of another repressed extreme. The ideal of equality is the fundamental proclaimed value of such systems, and this very principle is completely opposed to individual consciousness, the right to diverse opinions, actions, and value orientations. Thus, “different individuals” represent the greatest enemies, or the collective Shadow of totalitarian societies and totalitarian groups. The solution to this problem lies in awakening the consciousness of individuals.

In totalitarian systems, personal responsibility is projected onto the state and society. As a result of viewing themselves as powerless and helpless, individuals compensate by identifying with a powerful and strong state.

When individual consciousness and responsibility are lost, they open a vast space for the breakthrough of collective unconsciousness, which can actually only be realized through acts of individuals in regression. This depiction of reality seems rather pessimistic. Without personal responsibility and a relationship towards others and the different, empathy also fades into shadows.

Jung long advocated the idea that humanity is in a significant imbalance between technological, scientific, ethical, psychological, and spiritual development. This is also an imbalance between the unconscious (which carries enormous potential for destruction) and the conscious mind. In the late 1960s, Erich Neumann wrote that the task of modern psychology is to support individuation on the level of the collective, on the level of humanity.<sup>12</sup> He considered the problem of evil to be one of the greatest problems of a modern human.

What about the times we live in today? Is the world a happier, safer, more spiritual place compared to the first half of the last century? Have we distanced ourselves from highly authoritarian and totalitarian systems? Have we mastered the terrible lesson of perishment during the Holocaust? Today, in the age of globalization, corporations have taken the place of states, and the media and social networks serve as the context in which we are susceptible to a kind of “psychological infection”. There is little room left for differing opinions, for middle-ground positions, for integration instead of polarization. More than forty years ago, Christopher Lasch wrote his famous work, *The Culture of Narcissism*,<sup>13</sup> warning us of the risks of liberal capitalism, predominance of corporations, as well as the rise of competition and individualism, which lead to constant conflicts and “warfare of everyone against everyone”. In a narcissistic culture, humanity is in sort of a dead-end: the past and continuity are relativized and devalued, while narcissistic traits are encouraged, which lead to impoverishment of

<sup>12</sup> Erich Neumann, *Depth Psychology and a New Ethics* (G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1969).

<sup>13</sup> Kristofer Laš, *Narcistička kultura* (Naprijed, 1986).

the inner world. External models of happiness and prosperity erode the internal ability of a person to recognize and experientially feel satisfaction derived from a continuous and authentic sense of self. The modern individual is increasingly destructive and arrogant, egocentric and unaware of the laws and wondrous complexity of nature and the environment he destroys, while arrogantly referencing “development”, “prosperity”, and “material wealth”.

Nearly half a century after Neumann and Lasch, the renowned analyst James Hillman wonders whether, after a hundred years of psychotherapy, the world has become a better place. He suggests that in the modern social context, in which we are facing challenges posed by the expansion of destructive global processes, the analyst's office should transform into a “revolutionary cell”, an instrument for changing not only the individual but also the world we live in. The psyche, or soul, is found “in and among” people, while the world we live in is filled with symptoms. Ecological disasters, wars, migrations, polarization, and the tendency to perceive reality in binary categories, as well as huge exposure to information paired with paradoxically increased estrangement, are just some of the manifestations of contemporary society. They affect every individual and cannot be addressed or changed solely through individualistic psychology and psychotherapy.

Personal development that we, as psychotherapists, advocate does not necessarily lead to constructive political or social changes. In psychotherapy, we focus on personal relationships and family contexts; however, we rarely address what we call a sense of community. As an alternative, we might consider the Community Self or, as Hillman calls it – the Self of collectivity. By community, I mean the ecosystem, which extends beyond the people around us to include nature and our environment.

Hillman believes that the modern world we live in has elements of chronic mania. Perhaps this way of living serves as a means to avoid feelings of depression or the process of grieving caused by the image of the wrecked world around us, of nature and people who are suffering. We look at something that has been permanently destroyed, and as an alternative to grieving or showing empathy, we defend ourselves by turning toward achievement and external validation, while trying to avoid these difficult emotions.

But what we also know is that significant changes are often preceded by some kind of breakdowns, intensified crises that provide an opportunity to connect with what lies within our collective Shadow.<sup>14</sup> The collective Persona of a contemporary, modern, and successful society is marked by a high degree of individualism and efficiency, accompanied by constant social, cultural, and contextual pressure. This pressure does not leave room for transformation and change. We live in a postmodern discourse where many aspects of identity and social environment have been significantly altered.

One form of totalitarianism has been replaced by another – the trend of globalization and social media serving as a virtual global setting has created a fertile

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<sup>14</sup> Mari Luiz Fon-Franc, *Svet snova* (As-Sovex, 2005).

ground for collective projections. The global world is a world of narcissism and individualism; in it, community, empathy, decency, love, and connection are not the most desirable components of the collective Persona, so they partly transition into the collective Shadow.

In the contemporary social context that redefines the key elements of personality, we can also problematize the concept of normality. Accelerated technological development and the concept of “accelerated time” are beginning to threaten and alter the classical parameters of human connection. There are more and more people who find themselves “lonely in a crowd”, or in physical isolation yet with the illusion of connection in the virtual world. In a postmodern era that relativizes closeness and the importance of continuity, integrity, and personality cohesion, there is ever more room to validate a fragmented self that adapts to the fragmented world.<sup>15</sup> However, in this context many people feel lost, isolated, confused, dissatisfied, and alienated. A question arises: is there a change in our capacity for empathy due to the various transformations we’ve discussed? Empathy is the fundamental component of interpersonal relationships. We are born with the potential for empathy, and key developmental processes rely on its adequate use. The relationship between a mother and her baby, the mother’s empathetic response to the baby’s needs, is the foundation of all future experiences the child will build throughout life. There is no therapeutic paradigm that does not mention the importance of empathy in the development of a healthy individual, and a large part of our therapeutic work is based on using this capacity and repairing empathetic gaps that have occurred during development.

Whether we are working with children or adults, with individuals, couples, or families, our therapeutic interventions concentrate on awakening our clients’ potential for empathy. We teach them to develop empathy toward themselves, their own flaws and deficiencies, as this is the foundation for self-acceptance and any kind of change. We help them tolerate uncertainty in relationships and how to, by fostering empathy, gain insight into the inner lives of their children, partners, and others they interact with.

On the other hand, we are overwhelmed with content instructing us on how to build relationships, self-help literature, and podcasts that explain how to stand up for ourselves and our needs and how to be successful. In the context of analytical, Jungian psychology and psychotherapy, individuation is the focus of therapeutic work. Individuation means becoming who we truly are; it is a continuous, cyclical dialogue and integration of the different, conscious and unconscious, elements of the psyche. But how often do we address the topics and content that Hillman referred to as the Self of collectivity in our therapeutic work?<sup>16</sup> Does comprehension of empathy increase empathy in the contemporary context which we live in? And can empathy be confined exclusively to human relationships?

<sup>15</sup> Mirjana Jovanović Divac and Dragan Švrakić, *Granična ličnost i njena brojna lica* (Clio, 2021).

<sup>16</sup> Džejms Hilman, *Sto godina psihoterapije a svet sve gori* (Fedon, 2017).



To what extent have we failed to empathize with nature and our ecosystem, as a result of our focus on development, ego, and individuality? Here are a few examples from practice that reflect some of the themes we have covered in our work/in this paper:

**Vignette No. 1:** A client, highly anxious and with a strong abandonment complex due to a series of loss experiences, arrives at the session visibly upset because her neighbor plans to arrange for a walnut tree in the shared yard of their house to be cut down. She describes how she fears that something will go wrong, that the tree will fall the wrong way, and expresses anger at the neighbor's insistence. In the following session, with eyes full of tears she tells me, "Today they'll come to cut it down. Yesterday, I went out to hug it and said, 'I'm so sorry that you're going to die tomorrow...'" There was no anger or anxiety in her voice, only sorrow.

**Vignette No. 2:** A client arrives at the session and says, "Something happened two nights before, nothing terrible; my brother says I'm overreacting...but I'm still sad and feeling a sense of guilt. We were at a restaurant, and a young waiter, a nice guy, came to collect the payment. My brother was handling the money and only had large bills, so I gave him 200 dinars for the tip. Then I said, 'Wait, I have some change' (thinking of 50-dinar bills). I added that to the tip, then I looked at the young man and felt that the look in his eyes seemed somewhat sad. I regretted saying it that way, even though I didn't mean it like that... That scene kept replaying in my head all day, how I hadn't thought about him, how what I said was harsh and rude..."

**Vignette No. 3:** This isn't a clinical example but a story a friend of mine, a schoolteacher, shared with me. He told me about a boy who had been in an inclusive program in his school. After finishing elementary school, his parents enrolled him in an agricultural technical school, specializing in butchery. At school, he also had a mandatory internship at the butcher's shop every week. After some time, my friend ran into the boy's mother and asked how he was doing. "We had to withdraw him from that program; every time they had practical training, he would cry..."

Empathy and altruism are part of human nature. Love is not the result of working on something. We can help our clients to express themselves better, to communicate more clearly, but love is an archetypal state that makes us healthy human beings. Even Freud's definition of mental health was that a mentally healthy person is capable of loving and working. Moreover, in the context of the Community Self, we would also add – is able to connect with other people and the world around us. In a psychological sense, within the context of relationships, exchange, and empathy in a social environment, the world we live in and contemporary society do not exactly inspire much optimism but rather lead to some kind of helplessness or a need to create our own little islands of exchange.

If we return to the concept of the Shadow, however, Shadow often hides potentials which are waiting to be recognized and integrated. Although at times Hillman seems greatly disappointed in human nature, he says, “There is still a huge reservoir of human decency in the world.”<sup>17</sup>

As psychotherapists, we have the privilege of encountering those reservoirs of goodness and nobility in our work with some of our clients. Within this collective Shadow of the world, there is a great capacity for connection, understanding, care, and empathy, which makes it a powerful force. However, the Shadow is, by nature, designed to stay hidden and out of our awareness. It appears indirectly, masked, which is why we must engage our capacities to recognize it when it shows. Although the culture we live in is extroverted, teaching us to be fast, ambitious, and productive, working with the Shadow is a slow process – it means shifting our gaze downward, staying in contact with dark, unknown, and multidimensional experiences.<sup>18</sup> Those who deny the Shadow and attempt to suppress it continuously deepen the divide between good and evil – ‘us and them’. On the other hand, confronting the Shadow also leads to a greater degree of integration, the withdrawal of projections, and the acceptance of responsibility.

We hope that there is potential for such integration and that, despite all the challenges posed by the contemporary social context, we can find the will for understanding and dialogue, for empathy in a broader social context. More importantly, we hope that we can view and develop empathy not only as a relational social category but also in form of our relationship with nature which we are part of.

I will conclude with an inscription from the National Museum in Cusco (Peru):

“Over time, the Earth has undergone significant changes, allowing species to adapt. On the American continent, the increasing glaciation of the Andes led to the extinction of 46 genera of large mammals, known as “megafauna”.

In the Cusco Valley, a thin layer of cream-colored soil (tripoli) has been discovered, corresponding to the shores and bottom of the now-extinct Lake Morkill, which once served as a habitat for these megafauna.

In the last ten thousand years, the climate has remained stable giving way to the development of great cultures. However, today we are witnessing dramatic changes, a phenomenon we refer to as climate change, which threatens the survival of many species of flora and fauna. This phenomenon has, among other causes, anthropogenic factors (humans) which impact the environment, by polluting, deforesting, destroying ecosystems and overexploiting natural resources.

If we endeavor to make rational use of everything the Earth has to offer, there is still hope of salvation. The runas (humans) have a single large ch’uklla (house), called Pacha Mama (Mother Earth), HER LIFE IS IN DANGER. It is up to us to save her.”

<sup>17</sup> Hilman, *Sto godina psihoterapije a svet sve gori*.

<sup>18</sup> Jelena Sladojević Matić, “Encounter with Shadow and Its Manifestations in Fairy Tales and Literature,” *AM Journal of Art and Media Studies* 23 (2020): 149–58, <https://doi.org/10.25038/am.v0i23.403>.



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