

Empathy and Its Potential in Museum Practice

Andrew Simeone

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Michael Blake

Kristine Morrissey

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University of Washington

**Abstract**

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Andrew Simeone

Chair of the Supervisory Committee:  
Kristine Morrissey  
Museology

This research explores the museum community's interest in empathy. While some museum professionals affirm empathy's positive value, there are few resources that attempt to survey empathy in museum practice, let alone consider features of empathy such as its contribution to justice. This research combines a multi-disciplinary literature review with interviews with three museum professionals who discuss empathy in museum practice, the latter of which focuses on the following three categories: (1) definitions, (2) approaches and methods for eliciting empathy, and (3) outcomes of an increased focus on empathy. The findings indicate that empathy is not fully articulated by some museum professionals, that perspective-taking and personalizing exhibitions are ways to elicit empathy, and that empathy can be a tool for museum pedagogy. Moreover, considering the interest in museums as agents of social change, empathy in museum practice may find practical application in paving the way for justice.

## Contents

Acknowledgments	1
<b>Chapter 1: Introduction</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Chapter 2: Literature Review</b>	<b>5</b>
I. Empathy	6
Definitions and Vocabulary	6
Recognition of the Other's Individuality	8
What Empathy May Restrict and What May Restrict Empathy	8
Benefits of Empathy	10
II. Empathy Elicitation	12
Perspective-taking	12
Versions of Perspective-taking	14
III. Empathy in Museum Practice	16
Discussions and Research From the Museum Field	16
Effectiveness and Responsibility	18
<b>Chapter 3: Methodology</b>	<b>20</b>
I. Qualitative Study	20
II. Interviews	21
III. IRB Exemption and Research Travel Scholarship	21
IV. Interviewees and Museum Sites	22
V. Data Analysis	23
VI. Limitations	23
<b>Chapter 4: Results and Discussion</b>	<b>24</b>
I. A Note About Each Museum Site	24
II. Definitions of Empathy	26
III. Approaches and Methods for Eliciting Empathy	28
IV. Outcomes of an Increased Focus on Empathy	32
V. Implications for Museum Practice	34
Reference Definitions of Empathy	34
Determining When to Employ Empathy	35
Empathy Elicitation and Perspective-taking	36
Personalizing Others and Justice	38
Museum Pedagogy and Consensus	39
<b>Chapter 5: Conclusion</b>	<b>40</b>
References	43
Endnotes	48
Appendix A	50
Appendix B	52

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

Empathy appears to be an emerging topic of interest among some museum professionals. To start, some museum professionals have explored the concept of empathy, including its definitions, merits, and applications to museum practice (Cairns, 2012; Jennings, 2013a; Jennings, 2013b; Silvers, 2013). At the 2014 and 2015 American Alliance of Museums (AAM) conferences, respectively, *The Innovation Edge* and *The Social Value of Museums: Inspiring Change*, the following sessions on empathy were featured: Empathy Doesn't Count: Measuring What Matters in Exhibitions, Empathy in Mission and Practice: Why Should We Care?, and Exploring Empathy: Research on a Hot (but Tricky) Concept (2014 American Alliance, n.d.; 2015 American Alliance, n.d.). These empathy sessions advanced discussions on the consideration of institutional empathy for museums and presented museum-centered research that included methods for eliciting and evaluating empathy. Even if it was not fully developed, these museum professionals illuminated a relationship between empathy and museums.

However, providing an account of empathy, let alone its place in museum practice, is difficult because of the existence of a multitude of definitions (Neumann, Chan, Boyle, Wang, & Westbury, 2015) and a range of affective, cognitive, and physiological mechanisms (Batson, 2011; Neumann et al., 2015). Research from multiple disciplines has aimed to conceptualize empathy by analyzing its history and definitions (Neumann et al., 2015; Stueber, 2013), studying the process of eliciting empathy (Batson, 2011; Batson, Early, & Salvarani, 1997a), and scrutinizing outcomes of foregrounding empathy in our individual and collective moral pursuits (Bloom, 2013; Eisenberg, 2000; Okin, 1989). Literature on empathy suggests that empathy can have intrinsic (in and of itself) and instrumental (as a means to achieve results) value. For example, empathy's intrinsic value can be that it is personally enriching (Vetlesen, 1994) and its

instrumental value can be that it motivates helping behavior for others (Batson, 2011; Eisenberg & Miller, 1987) and contributes to justice (Okin, 1989).

What appears to be missing from discussions on empathy in museum practice is research that both looks at empathy across disciplines and investigates how some museum professionals currently working in the field understand and apply the concept. While the aforementioned research from museum professionals provides important contributions to empathy in museum practice, there are certain features of empathy that have not been discussed. Part of this research's contribution to a fuller understanding of empathy is to present these features to inform museum practice and possibly reevaluate when and how empathy should be applied.

Therefore, Chapter 2: Literature Review will attempt to locate and survey a range of theories about empathy and research on empathy elicitation, proposing a foundational definition of empathy for this research's qualitative study. Part of this chapter will focus on perspective-taking as an empathy elicitation approach (Batson et al., 1997a), the choice of which will be made clearer in this chapter. Attention will also be given to the museum field's conceptualizations of empathy.

Chapter 3: Methodology will establish this research's criteria for a qualitative study of empathy and museums. This includes interviews with three museum professionals who discuss empathy in museum practice. Chapter 3 will also introduce an interview guide and coding charts, and assess the limitations of this study.

Chapter 4: Results and Discussion will present the findings from the interviews, organized by three categories that explore the dimensions of empathy:

1. Definitions of Empathy
2. Approaches and Methods for Eliciting Empathy

### 3. Outcomes of an Increased Focus on Empathy

Following the results, the implications to museum practice will be thought out. Moreover, based on both the literature and the results, this research will consider how and when empathy should be applied in a museum.

And Chapter 5: Conclusion will recap this research and reiterate suggestions for the future of empathy in museum practice.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

Chapter 2 is divided into three parts. Part I reviews empathy through philosophical, psychological, and social neuroscientific literature, but does not look at empathy neurologically nor ways to measure empathy.<sup>1</sup> A definition of empathy will be proposed to apply to this research's qualitative study.

Part II reviews empathy elicitation through psychological studies and philosophical analyses, focusing on the method of perspective-taking. Perspective-taking has the potential to be better suited for museum practice than other empathy elicitation methods because perspective-taking appears to be a component of museum practice, especially when considering museums that foreground an understanding of history and its agents.

Part III reviews empathy and perspective-taking in museum practice. This section pulls from a variety of resources (academic sources, blog posts, conference documents) and attempts to survey empathy as it is currently understood by some museum professionals.

## I. Empathy

### Definitions and Vocabulary

Empathy is multi-faceted, “a fact that is also mirrored in the multiplicity of definitions associated with the empathy concept in a number of different scientific and non-scientific discourses” (Stueber, 2013, para. 1). Neumann et al. (2015) found that empathy did not have a premier definition, stating, “A review of the major definitions of empathy over the past 20 years reveals that there is no single definition that is consistently cited; indeed the multitude of definitions is often cited as a distinct feature of the field” (p. 257). Likewise, Batson (2011) determined that the term empathy had been applied to no less than eight psychological states, and that empathy included a constellation of emotions.

Translated from the German word *Einfühlung*, meaning, “feeling into” (Stueber, 2013, para. 2), the English word empathy was derived from the Hellenistic Greek word *empathia*, meaning “passion” (“Empathy”, n.d.). Although there is a shared vocabulary for describing empathy, nuances exist within fields of research.

Stotland (1969), coming from the psychology field, thought of empathy broadly as, “an observer's reacting emotionally because he perceives that another is experiencing or is about to experience an emotion” (p. 272). More recently in this field, Batson (2011) defined empathy as an, “*other-oriented emotion elicited by and congruent with the perceived welfare of someone in need*” (p. 11). In Batson’s definition, empathy is feeling *for* another in need, and is comprised of a network of emotions like compassion and sorrow. In philosophical literature, Vetlesen (1994) saw empathy as the, “basic faculty of relating to others,” (p. 148) that was, “*other-regarding or –directed*” (p. 8). Additionally, Vetlesen underlined the importance of proximity between persons when facilitating empathy development, finding that physical separateness inhibited empathy. In

the social neuroscience field, empathy has been described as, “a social emotion that allows an observer to feel what another person is feeling,<sup>2</sup> with a clear distinction between the self and another” (Preusche & Lamm, 2015, p. 2). Here, the affective component of empathy is emphasized, as well as recognition of the murky boundary between the self and the other.

Furthermore, Wispé (1986) believed empathy to be a process of *knowing*, distinct from sympathy, which was believed to be a process of *relating*. Preusche and Lamm (2015) found empathy to be a, “feeling as” (p. 2), social emotion separate from, “feeling for” (p. 2), social emotions like compassion, emotion contagion, empathic concern, and sympathy, the likes of which contain motivational components. In addition, Pagotto (2010) found empathy had been considered a, “feeling with” (p. 5), emotion, synonymous with perspective-taking, an individual trait, or an affective and/or cognitive state.

Nevertheless, Neumann et al. (2015) located commonality among the numerous empathy definitions surveyed, that being, “an inductive affective (feeling) and cognitive evaluative (knowing) process that allows the individual to vicariously experience feelings and understand the given situation of another” (p. 257). They also found that, “empathy is a fundamental emotional and motivational component that facilitates sympathy and prosocial behavior (*responding compassionately*)” (p. 257), emphasizing that the affective and cognitive components of empathy allow us to access another’s feelings and situation in some way, and that this is motivational.

This is not to say that other concepts, such as sympathy, do not evoke the affective, cognitive, and motivational components that are believed to be found in empathy, but that empathy is recognized as encompassing these components. Therefore, this paper proposes that empathy is *feeling with another and comprehending their situation, that is motivationally active*.

### **Recognition of the Other's Individuality**

In the previous section, empathy was shown to have been conceived differently across and even within disciplines. What follows is what is worth noticing about empathy, namely, that it involves recognizing the other's individuality (Batson, 2011). Vetlesen (1994) saw empathy as distinct from identification because empathy preserved the other's, "difference and distinctness" (p. 204), that identification removed. Vetlesen stated, "the essence of empathy lies in one subject's retaining rather than abandoning his or her own standpoint and identity in the course of his or her endeavor to recognize the other as other"<sup>3</sup> (p. 204). Otherwise, in erasing the boundary between the self and the other, the other could become obscured in the self's interests and views.

Vetlesen proposed solidarity in larger-scale settings, specifically where others were physically absent. According to this proposition, solidarity presupposed empathy and, "involves the cognitive faculty of universalization, or rendering the particular abstract, as well as the emotional faculty of being affected, or rendering the abstract concrete, the alien human" (p. 322). Solidarity, therefore, is based on shared humanity and reconciles emotions across large divides. It can provide nuanced and empathetic perception that illuminates what we did not previously know about others, in addition to aspects of ourselves. Thus, by acknowledging and being responsive to the other, we may reflect on the other's situation to inform our own.

### **What Empathy May Restrict and What May Restrict Empathy**

Considering how empathy can open us up to the situation and feelings of another, it is worth noting the ways, bad and good, that society might be affected by an increased focus on empathy. Bloom (2013) has criticized decisions resulting from empathy, highlighting some of its setbacks: "it is parochial, narrow-minded, and innumerate" (para. 9). While Bloom recognized

that our empathy could have the capacity for profound acts of helping behavior, this was only realized when reason was factored into decision-making. It is not that we ought to have a world without empathy, but that its use for certain interventions can have potentially negative short- and long- term outcomes. The affective component, distinct from the cognitive part of empathy, may not produce the necessary help that would most benefit the people in need (Bloom, 2013; Bloom, 2014).

Bloom's skepticism echoes a worry that affect does not have moral knowledge in itself, which can cause us to rely too heavily on the *feeling* part of our emotions. For example, Bloom argues that people tend to, "care more about the one than about the mass, so long as we have personal information about the one" (Bloom, 2014). Prinz (2012) shared this concern about the consequences of unrestricted empathy, arguing that empathy was selective. In order to offset empathy's potential selectivity or inaction, "a mechanism of motivation" (p.18), and "a mechanism for determining moral considerability" (p. 18), would need to be included. This would possibly require combining empathy with the motivational forces of pride or anger, or when contemplating injustice, focusing more on *what* has happened and not *who* it happened to, as the latter could call forth personal biases. And when it came to groups of people, empathizing would not be possible without considering each member of the groups, a task deemed impossible or at least highly unlikely when factoring in the vicarious pain in that process (Prinz, 2012).

Furthermore, there may be factors that restrict empathy, such as suppressing emotions (Lebowitz & Dovidio, 2015). Vetlesen (1994) points to a lack of empathy being the result of a lack of exposure to empathy. Vetlesen says, "individuals whose primary love objects or self-objects have failed to display empathy toward them may thus themselves fail to develop empathy towards others" (p. 327). This may contribute to the development of individual skills and morals,

whereas we may falsely project or let stereotypes, norms, and biases influence our empathy. Batson (2011) noted that empathy could decline over time and that enduring social problems, and those who suffer as a result of them, could be more difficult to direct empathy toward (p. 216) and be subject to moral disengagement. As well, we may have difficulty empathizing with those we dislike (p. 194).

### **Benefits of Empathy**

Studies by Batson (2011) have demonstrated the positive, instrumental benefits of empathy. According to Batson's empathy-altruism hypothesis, "empathic concern produces altruistic motivation"<sup>4</sup> (p. 11). Meaning, if we have empathic concern, or empathy, for another's welfare, and believe that we are capable of action that can alleviate their needs or are shown and encouraged that we could do so, then we will be more likely to offer assistance to that particular other. Supporting this hypothesis are studies by Batson, Chang, Orr and Rowland (2002), and Sierksma, Thijs, and Verkuyten (2015) that indicate we do not need to share group membership with another to act empathetically towards them. We could see another as different and still act on their behalf, even if they were physically absent and we had not experienced their needs (Batson, 2011).

Additionally, a review of studies have shown a significant connection between empathy and helping behaviors (Batson, 2011; Eisenberg & Miller, 1987), that empathy elicitation could cultivate social bonds (Galinsky, Ku, & Wang, 2005), that empathy could foster positive attitudes toward stigmatized groups (Batson, Polycarpou, Harmon-Jones, Imhoff, Mitchener, Bednar, Klein, & Highberger, 1997b), that the positive attitudes developed towards stigmatized

groups could lead to action that would benefit said groups (Batson et al., 2002), and that empathy was a source for moral behavior and moral development (Eisenberg, 2000).

Empathy has also been discussed as a source for justice, in particular, distributive justice. Hoffman (2000) wrote, “**while empathy may not make a structural contribution to justice, it may provide the motive to rectify violations of justice to others**” (p. 228-9). For example, if we have empathy for someone who is the victim of oppression, that empathy may be a motivating emotion for alleviating that person’s suffering. Okin (1989), too, argued that justice considered through empathy and impartiality, instead of solely impartiality, allowed one to make considerations from various perspectives. Speaking about the original position, a thought experiment for impartially determining principles of justice, Okin (1989) stated:

the only coherent way in which a party in the original position can think about justice is through empathy with persons of all kinds in all the different positions in society, but especially with the least well-off in various respects. To think as a person in the original position is not to be a disembodied nobody. This... would be impossible. Rather, it is to think from the point of view of everybody, of every "concrete other" whom one might turn out to be (p. 248).

From Okin’s viewpoint, purveyors of justice have placed an emphasis on reason and seemingly disregarded the benefits of affect. To disconnect the ties between reason and feeling may be a misunderstanding of how we distribute justice, as reason alone may not give us insight into the feelings of others and to the content of another’s situation that is a subject in decision-making. In order to make a greater contribution to justice, it may be necessary to combine empathy with reason in order to consider the viewpoints of those who we could possibly be so that our decisions account for those less well-off than ourselves.

## II. Empathy Elicitation

### Perspective-taking

There are a variety of ways to elicit empathy, such as emotion-specific misattribution, similarity manipulation, and perspective-taking (Batson, 2011; Harel & Kogut, 2014; Pagotto, 2010; Sierksma et al., 2015). Because studies on empathy elicitation were contrived, often with little demand placed on participants, their effective application may only occur under specific conditions and be recognized in certain ways. However, perspective-taking has been studied as an elicitor of empathy (Batson, 2011; Batson et al., 1997a; Pagotto, 2010) and has been found to be connected to altruism (Underwood & Moore, 1982), to preventing group biases (Sierksma et al., 2015), and to decreases in stereotyping, prejudice, social aggression, and interpersonal conflict (Galinsky et al., 2005). Moreover, it has been shown to be applicable to museum practice (Herz, 2015). The nature of perspective-taking allows it to be applied to content, in this case museums, without having to make costly revisions to the content's arrangement.

Research has conceptualized perspective-taking in multiple ways. It can be a process through which we imagine *how another would feel in their situation* or it can be a process through which we imagine *how we would feel in that other's situation*, respectively the imagine-other and imagine-self perspectives (Batson et al., 1997a). Perspective-taking has also been adapted as situation-based and emotion-based. The former requires perspective-takers to *put themselves in their target's situation* and the latter requires perspective-takers to *identify the emotions of their target and think of a similar situation where they, the perspective-takers, felt similar emotions* (Mendoza, 1997). Considering these possibilities, this paper proposes perspective-taking as *a process of cognitively imagining another's experience*.

Perspective-taking is commonly associated with the instruction to *stand in ones shoes* (Mendoza, 1997). Mendoza argued that this instruction did little to explain the process of perspective-taking, and that instructions had to be broad enough so that the other did not appear too different, yet narrow enough so that they did not appear too similar. Instructions needed to be clear and specific, telling people *how* to engage in perspective-taking. Mendoza suggested that it may be more effective to instruct perspective-takers to not imagine another's situation, but instead imagine a situation where they, the perspective-taker, responded similarly. This is because there may be a tendency for perspective-takers to imagine that they would respond differently in another's situation, given their assessment of that situation in a fuller context. In essence, the perspective-taker may conceive of the process based on how they *ought to* respond, instead of how they likely *would* respond. The former may result in perspective-takers distancing themselves from understanding another's situation.

Research has suggested that a recognition of the distinction between the perspective-taker and the other was key to effective perspective-taking. Imagining how we would feel in a certain situation was more susceptible to personal distress than imagining how another would feel in their situation (Batson et al., 1997a). Prinz (2012) shared this belief, arguing that vicarious stress could negatively impact helping, since we may be inclined to attend to our own perceived distress and not the other's well-being that was in our sight. Similarly, Harel & Kogut (2015) argued that people seemed to be more generous when they were content, and that those in a hot empathy state (those experiencing a similar emotional state to another person) were more capable of accurate perspective-taking than those in a cold state (those not experiencing a similar emotional state). This provides evidence to a claim that perspective-taking is individualistic.

### **Versions of Perspective-taking**

Perspective-taking relies on imaginatively considering another's experiences or life events from that other's unique perspective. There are different versions of imperfect perspective-taking that may have implications for how empathy might be elicited. Each contains its own complexities and requires a certain level of cognitive skills to perform. These four versions of perspective-taking are examined to see what each may impart to the perspective-taker.

At its simplest, perspective-taking can involve projecting ourselves into the novel circumstances of another individual, or the imagine-self perspective (Batson et al., 1997a). This version is implicitly a self-focused exercise that acknowledges another's perspective, but might fail to appreciate that the situation is experienced quite differently by a person with values and history different from our own. That is, this form of perspective-taking likely does not fully appreciate interpersonal differences.

A second version of perspective-taking can also involve a similar projection, but in a self-alienated way, such that we attempt to compensate for the differences between ourselves and others. As we think about the novel experiences another person has gone through, we simultaneously appreciate that those experiences happened to another subject, or the imagine-other perspective (Batson et al., 1997a). We then use what we know about the other's history and values to try to see their circumstances through their eyes. In this version of perspective-taking *we* disappear. While this kind of perspective-taking may avoid the problem of the previous version, it comes with risks of its own. This kind of perspective-taking might fail to appreciate that different histories and values do not erase the fact that all persons have certain features in common, and may overlook deeper commonalities.

A third version of perspective-taking could involve an overlapping of the first two versions. This seemed to have been borne out by Galinsky et al. (2015), who stated, “the self is applied to the other, so that the other becomes more ‘self-like’...Second, the other is included in the self, so that the self becomes more ‘other-like’” (p. 118). In trying to avoid a self-focused or self-alienated exercise, we think about the novel circumstances of another person from a shared perspective, such that we come to appreciate the interconnectedness with people in very different circumstances. This poses its own problems, as there may be a risk of arrogance. In bridging the gap between self-focus and self-alienation, we may presume insight into another’s perspective, when in fact, the nature of perspective-taking is always limited.

Beyond these three versions of perspective-taking, Lugones (1987) provided a picture of an ideal version of perspective-taking that blended all of the aforementioned insights, and coped with the risks. Recall that the first two versions each risk leading to an alienated understanding that has the potential to misrepresent relationships between individuals, either by overstating or understating difference. The third version recognizes those risks, but may not manage to properly acknowledge the essential limits associated with all perspective-taking efforts. Lugones endorsed a modest, interconnected understanding that avoided the pitfalls of arrogance. A modification of the third version, Lugones described this phenomenon as “world”-travelling, and argued that by travelling to another’s world, “we can understand what it is to be them and what it is to be ourselves in their eyes” (p. 17). Our understanding of another can always be improved, and Lugones’ “world”-traveler is forever curious about the other and remains in solidarity with them.

Ultimately, there are many ways to get to empathy, with perspective-taking being one of those ways. Engaging in perspective-taking exercises, perspective-takers will have to decide how much perspective they want to take, how they value the individual(s) whose life experience(s)

they are attempting to imagine, and remember that perspective-taking is always limited. From there, these perspective-takers will determine how they follow up this process.

### **III. Empathy in Museum Practice**

#### **Discussions and Research From the Museum Field**

The application and purpose of empathy in museum practice is an ongoing discussion among some museum professionals. Generally, there is explicit use of the concept for museum practice and recognition that it is an instrumentally and intrinsically valuable emotion. Nevertheless, it appears to be a challenging concept for museum professionals to grasp conceptually, with there being the presence of ideas that might be rephrased as empathy (Bonnell & Simon, 2007) and discussions that assess its merits for social change.

Arnold-de-Simine, who has written on memory in museums, has stated that empathy, “is ubiquitous but rarely explicitly addressed and pervasive assumptions are hardly ever interrogated” (Arnold-de-Simine, 2013, p. 42), and that it, “is often not sufficiently distinguished from other emotional engagements such as identification, concern or solidarity” (p. 44). Museum professionals like Cairns (2013) have attempted to broach the topic, discussing empathy’s origins, pros, cons, and paradoxes, concluding with uncertainty about how empathy could best be applied to practice. Cairns (2013) also recognized that empathy consisted of three types, “cognitive, emotional and compassionate” (para. 5), questioned what an empathetic museum would look like, and referenced criticisms from Paul Bloom and Jesse Prinz. Jennings (2013a) explored empathy as well, targeting what museums could do to be more empathetic and proposing empathy as an institutional policy (Jennings, 2013b). And Silvers (2013) described empathy as being a tool that a museum could use as part of its assets and designs.

Coming to a definition of empathy highlighted the range, and underlying uncertainty, of empathy's interpretation from a museum perspective. Jennings (2013b) presented empathy as, "the experience of feeling with and not just for another," and noted that this required, "a strong core, a sense of self that can dare to be open to the experience of others." Jennings mentioned that the most noteworthy parts of empathy definitions were, "the idea of experiencing the feelings of others from either the **past or present**," and, "the idea of experiencing others' feelings without them being fully and explicitly communicated, i.e. **knowing without being told**" (Jennings, 2013a). In this sense, empathy transcends time and relies on a mix of cognitive skills and intuition. Herz (2015) defined empathy as, "a feeling of shared emotion with another person. It is not 'I understand what you are feeling,' but rather, 'I am feeling what you are feeling.'" Herz believed this conceptualization had particular relevance to museums, in that, "looking at a portrait of someone, or visiting an exhibition about a historical figure or moment, these distant people are palpable and present" (Herz, 2015). This recalls *Einfühlung*, or "feeling into" (Stueber, 2013, para. 2), as a means to describe how individuals related to works of art.

Both Herz (2015) and Silvers (2013) stated that perspective contributed to empathy development. Although Silvers did not refer to the process of perspective-taking, the process still seemed to be evoked as, "*understanding the perspective of others* and using that understanding to guide our actions" (emphasis mine). Herz (2015) went so far as to define perspective-taking as, "imagining or hypothesizing about what it would be like to be in another person's shoes," adding, "the phrase perspective taking is often used interchangeably with the word empathy." Along with Miriam Bader, Director of Education at the Lower East Side Tenement Museum, and Adam Nilsen, a PhD candidate studying empathy at the Stanford University School of Education, Herz conducted research at the Lower East Side Tenement Museum and presented the

findings at the 2015 AAM conference in the session, Exploring Empathy: Research on a Hot (but Tricky) Concept (2015 American Alliance, n.d.). This included the following instructions for perspective-taking activities: providing context, supporting perspective-taking instructions with guidance, being careful to not make false comparisons, and the appropriateness of mild, physical discomfort (Herz, 2015).

Overall, there seemed to be alignment in the thinking of some museum professionals and what the literature on empathy and perspective-taking theorized. While not exhaustive, there was mention of the cognitive and affective components of empathy, the emotional state of individuals, the connection between perspective-taking and empathy, what empathy restricts, and the potential outcomes of employing empathy.

### **Effectiveness and Responsibility**

Other areas of museum literature have focused on empathy's inclusion in difficult content. Empathy, having connections to justice, is relevant when dealing with content about people who were abused by unjust systems of power. Bonnell and Simon (2007), reviewing exhibitions that contained content that is difficult for visitors to construct meaning out of in relation to themselves (p. 67), made suggestions for museums that sought to work with perspectives. They cautioned that the idea of taking perspectives had potential drawbacks when operating in difficult exhibitions, specifically, "one may identify with the other to the extent of losing oneself, and, as a result, fail to grasp the implication of one's difference from others" (69). In response, they put forth the benefits of intimacy (a concept that evokes empathy) for the reason that it, "resists attempts to reduce the other's experience to something graspable or containable. In this act of acknowledgement lies the possibility for insight; the possibility of a

transformative critique of one's way of understanding the world" (p. 69). Thus, openness towards another has the potential for insight into another's world view that informs our own. To make this applicable, they proposed re-conceptualizing empathy as:

a relation of acknowledgement, a responsiveness to the feelings of others that opens the question of what it might mean to live in proximity to these feelings, to live in ways in which one experiences the force of these feelings to alter one's experience of the world and actions in it. This acknowledgement of the other's situation neither presupposes nor implies that one actually feels what the other feels. It is a process...in which the other remains other, a process within which our distinctiveness as individual persons is not obliterated (p. 76).

Here, the understanding of empathy is less focused on *feeling as* and more predicated on a *responsiveness to others*. An improved understanding informs and reinforces our empathy, which in turn impacts our actions.

Bonnell and Simon (2007) also stressed the importance of responsibility. They argued a museum should not present difficult exhibitions thinking that they, in and of themselves, lead to action. They also believed that these exhibitions should not, "be justified only in terms of offering experiences that might stimulate feelings comparable to those held by others, assuming that this will encourage efforts to relieve existing pain and suffering while preventing their re-occurrence" (p. 81). By doing so, a museum may emotionally exploit visitors without providing guidance and self-reflection.

Likewise, Arnold-de-Simine's work has dealt with memory and empathy as they functioned in museums, and has offered considerations about empathy's role in a museum context. Arnold-de-Simine (2013) has worried that empathy for others could fail if an explicit

distinction between the self and the other was not highlighted (p. 45), and questioned how, in regards to topics like slavery, the distinction could be made without making the victims degraded beings or the viewers complicit in voyeurism (p. 107). These considerations echoed those of Bonnell and Simon's when Arnold-de-Simine stated, "mere knowledge about the past does not suffice to prevent the perpetuation of violent and traumatic histories" (p. 1), and that the role of a museum may be to act as, "facilitators in that process by providing experimentally oriented encounters with the help of multimedia technologies" (p. 1). It is not that visitors are incapable of meaning-making on their own, but that the risk is a far greater cost if they cannot.

According to Arnold-de-Simine, empathy has the ability to bridge gaps between people in nontraditional ways (p. 201). On the one hand, its combination of affective and cognitive understanding allows for transformation, and insights into the lives of others. On the other hand, it brings with it a cost, a potential identification with the other that can obliterate the other's individuality. Therefore, disregarding empathy in a museum context may overlook its function in education, as a way to question our perceptions and how we act based on them.

## **Chapter 3: Methodology**

### **I. Qualitative Study**

To fulfill this research's goal of advancing a fuller understanding of empathy in museum practice, a qualitative study was conducted. This consisted of semi-structured interviews with museum professionals who have written about and presented on empathy and museums. The strengths of qualitative research are its focus on revealing and interpreting the meanings of concepts (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 25), for instance, those that have not been thoroughly explored. It undertakes this endeavor by looking at the following: "(1) how people interpret their

experiences, (2) how they construct their worlds, and (3) what meaning they attribute to their experiences. The overall purpose is to *understand* how people make sense of their lives and their experiences” (p. 24). For the purposes of this research, a basic qualitative study would be used to explore empathy in museum practice, from conceptualizations to practical techniques to potential outcomes, with the intention of presenting and discussing the results.

## **II. Interviews**

The semi-structured interviews provided the ability to discuss facets of empathy that were grounded in the interviewee’s museum. The questions used in the interviews were based on an interview guide that can be seen in Appendix A and were designed to identify the dimensions of empathy, such as its limits and connections to other emotions. Prior to the interviews, interviewees were provided with questions from the interview guide so that they could have some time to consider the upcoming content of the discussion.

Each interview was preceded by an observation of the museum site during operation hours to provide context for the following interview. The interviews took place in the participants’ offices and were digitally recorded for audio.

## **III. IRB Exemption and Research Travel Scholarship**

This research, on January 28, 2016, was granted Institutional Review Board (IRB) exemption to conduct these interviews. Additionally, the travel for this research was funded by the Museology Program’s Research Travel Scholarship.

#### **IV. Interviewees and Museum Sites**

The interviewees were selected based on the following criteria: any museum professional who had published essays on empathy and museums in the past five years or upcoming calendar year,<sup>5</sup> or any museum professional who had presented at museum conferences on the topic of empathy and museums in the past five years. The interviewees were interviewed in person at their place of work.

The three interviewees were:

1. Lynne Azarchi, Executive Director of the Kidsbridge Tolerance Center, formerly the Kidsbridge Tolerance Museum, in Ewing, New Jersey.
2. Miriam Bader, Director of Education at the Lower East Side Tenement Museum in New York, New York.
3. Dina Bailey, former Director of Educational Strategies at the Center for Civil and Human Rights in Atlanta, Georgia.

The Center for Civil and Human Rights (The Center) is a relatively new museum, opened in 2014, that focuses on the history of the American Civil Rights Movement and universal human rights. Its multimedia exhibitions and interactives involve visitors in the activism of the past and its relevancy in the present (“National Center”, n.d.).

The Lower East Side Tenement Museum (Tenement Museum) is a museum whose mission is to tell the history of immigration through the experiences of immigrants in Manhattan’s Lower East Side. The Tenement Museum offers guided tours of its tenements at 97 Orchard Street, living history programs, and walking tours of the surrounding neighborhood. Its content is history-based and includes interactive storytelling that samples from the lives of immigrants who lived in the tenements (“Lower East Side”, n.d.).

The Kidsbridge Tolerance Center (Kidsbridge), formerly the Kidsbridge Tolerance Museum, is a center for students, grades K-12, committed to empathy, empowerment, and education. With evidence-based status, Kidsbridge engages students with hands-on and interactive exhibits. Its exhibition content is primarily history-based and is designed to empower students to advocate for themselves and each other. Upon arrival, students are separated into small groups led by the staff, and focus on topics such as diversity, prejudice, genocide, and community (“Kidsbridge”, n.d.).

## **V. Data Analysis**

Following the site visits, the interviews were transcribed. These transcriptions were analyzed using a general inductive approach (Thomas, 2006) to locate information relevant to the research categories that were mentioned in Chapter 1 (Definitions of Empathy, Approaches and Methods for Eliciting Empathy, Outcomes of an Increased Focus on Empathy). Three coding tables based on these research categories were created to house the interview data and can be seen in Appendix B. Some of the data was not included in Chapter 4 because it was deemed outside the scope of this research. Despite this, it remained in the coding tables for others to potentially reference.

## **VI. Limitations**

This research is limited to interviews with *three* museum professionals working in history-based museums in the eastern part of the United States. These particulars (museum type and location) were not analyzed, however they may have informed the interviewee’s perspectives in that they may be partial to a certain school of thought.

Furthermore, the interview guide and the questions asked during the interviews may have limited the data collection due to their framing and wording. To account for this, some of the interview questions were sent to the interviewees prior to the interviews to clarify the research objectives and give the interviewees time to consider the questions. Even so, the interviews may not have revealed the complete depth of knowledge or articulation of the interviewees' thoughts on empathy in museum practice because of the difficulties in discussing complicated topics like empathy. Therefore, the results from these interviews are based on these particular interviews at their particular times.

#### **Chapter 4: Results and Discussion**

This chapter is divided into five parts. The first will be brief observations of the museum sites. The next three will each focus on one of three categories that explores the dimensions of empathy:

1. Definitions of Empathy
2. Approaches and Methods for Eliciting Empathy
3. Outcomes of an Increased Focus on Empathy

These three parts will contain quotes and results from the interviews and a discussion of them.

The fifth part will consider the implications of the findings. All of the quotes and the categories they are organized by can be seen in Appendix B, Tables 1-3.

#### **I. A Note About Each Museum Site**

The Center has four multimedia and multisensory gallery spaces. Of interest are *Rolls Down Like Water: The American Civil Rights Movement* and *Spark of Conviction: The Global*

Human Rights Movement. *Rolls Down Like Water* documented the complexities of the American Civil Rights Movement during the 1950s and 1960s, and the individuals, known and unknown, who fought for equal rights. Visitors are presented with exhibitions that focus on the March on Washington, the 16<sup>th</sup> Street Baptist Church bombing, and the opponents of the civil rights movement like George Wallace and James Earl Ray. Visitors have the opportunity to walk up the steps of a recreated Lorraine Motel and participate in the lunch counter simulator, an interactive that simulates the verbal and physical abuse some non-violent civil rights protestors experienced. In *Spark of Conviction*, contemporary human rights are examined, with focus placed on current activists and offenders at-large. Here, visitors are encouraged to get involved in human rights discussions and have the opportunity to share and document their voices. Threaded through both galleries are the struggles and successes of human rights movements.

The Tenement Museum does not have a formal exhibition space, instead the tenements of 97 Orchard Street on the Lower East Side of Manhattan could be explored by participating in one of the many tours offered by the museum. Before the interview with Miriam Bader, the Irish Outsiders tour was taken that focused on the Moores, an Irish immigrant family in New York in 1869. Visitors are taken on a tour of the Moores' residence and shown the hardships they may have faced adapting to a new culture and lifestyle. The educator who led the tour facilitated discussion throughout, allowing the visitors' interests to shape some of the tour's focus. Other programs offered at the museum included living history programs with costumed interpreters and walking tours of the surrounding neighborhood.

Kidsbridge has exhibition spaces and interactive materials for visiting classes of students, grades K-12. Upon arrival, students are separated into small groups facilitated by trained group leaders. The exhibition spaces are adapted to the desired topic(s) of discussion and feature hands-

on activities that address issues from a personal to a global level. At the time of this site visit, there were no students visiting the museum.

## II. Definitions of Empathy

According to Dina Bailey, empathy, “feels like a way in which a visitor may connect better to him or herself, better to a past, and to a better understanding of that connection in the context of relevance in the world,” and summed up empathy as, “that true connection and understanding of yourself and others.” These responses seemed indicative of the definitions of empathy recorded from the three interviews, that empathy was described in terms of *how*, not *what*. That is, empathy was defined more by its impacts than an articulation of the concept. This is not unusual, as there are many everyday concepts that we do not possess concept mastery of. But it suggested that the nature of the understandings of empathy resulted not from theory and then to practice, but from how it could best contribute to the museum’s mission and from observing visitor reactions.

For instance, Bailey believed that empathy was, “an active, more than a passive, expression.” This seemed to align with The Center’s encouragement of activism in regards to the ongoing pursuit of universal human rights. In addition, Bailey believed that singling out empathy would be difficult, that it, “will always be tied to other emotions as well,” like love, anxiety, frustration, and anger. In this sense, empathy is not a standalone emotion, but one that is connected to many of our other emotional fibers.

Miriam Bader pointed to the Tenement Museum’s mission statement when defining empathy, stating that, “the core of empathy here at the museum comes from our mission statement, which uses the words, ‘to forge emotional connections,’ and those emotional

connections often take the form of empathy.” At the Tenement Museum, empathy functioned as an emotional connection that visitors could make when participating in one of the museum’s tours. Considering the history of immigration in America, and how some immigrants have been denied formal political acceptance, this emotional connection could be the means to reaffirm our shared humanity irrespective of partisanship. However, Bader acknowledged that empathy was not the only way that people made connections and that empathy required cognitive understanding. For example, if a person could not understand the daily life of Bridget from the Irish Outsiders tour, then that person could not understand the struggles she faced while raising three children. If from there, that person was able to empathize, they would also need to care in order to act on that empathy.

Lynne Azarchi saw empathy as a mix of emotion and perspective-taking, stating, “empathy is the emotion. To me, empathy is the walking in the shoes.” Azarchi believed that empathy, “is one of the drivers to do the right thing, stand up, speak out.” At Kidsbridge, a perspective-based empathy fit into its exhibition design that engaged students through perspective-taking, using past experiences and emotions to acknowledge the situations of others. Here, the connection between empathy and an imagine-self perspective-taking was most explicit. Even so, Azarchi stressed that without empowerment, empathy would likely not be substantially acted upon, and that one of the goals of Kidsbridge was to empower students to take part in the changes they wanted to see realized.

Overall, these definitions implied that empathy could allow us to be more in sync with the emotional and physical well-being of each other, and that empathy has motivational qualities, both of which have been recorded in literature (Batson, 2011; Neumann et al., 2015). Although the museums did not share similar definitions, a common foundation of empathy seemed to be

implicit in the museum practices, that a recognition of another's pain, past or present, can elicit empathy, and that this resulting empathy can motivate us to prevent this pain from reoccurring in others.

### **III. Approaches and Methods For Eliciting Empathy**

Considering the resources and missions of the museum sites, different approaches were taken to prime the spaces for empathy elicitation. Dina Bailey felt that The Center had certain obligations to prepare for and build upon the potential empathy that resulted from participating in the exhibitions. Acknowledging individual differences and the distinction between eliciting (evoking) empathy in the museum and cultivating (developing) long-term empathy, Bailey said, “to have one experience and then not prep people for it but not build upon it either, is not only a lost opportunity but it is not doing justice to individuals or to the museum goals or to the exhibition.” Therefore, “threading empathy,” throughout the museum and materials would support this. Miriam Bader believed that empathy elicitation was dependent on the opportunities that the Tenement Museum built into their exhibitions. However, empathy elicitation was not something that they could necessarily have a direct hand in eliciting because of visitor individuality. According to Bader, institutions such as the Tenement Museum would have to be realistic and sets their expectations accordingly, realizing that empathy was dependent on a host of factors. Lynne Azarchi felt that Kidsbridge could maximize its effectiveness by creating an open, safe, and caring environment. In Azarchi's view, students would, “feel it's a safe place because we're telling them this: ‘we care about what you think.’”

In regards to eliciting empathy, The Center's lunch counter simulator exemplified the process. At the simulator, visitors sit down on a stool at a recreated lunch counter, put on

headphones, and are encouraged to close their eyes. For the next minute and a half visitors experience the verbal abuse a civil rights protestor may have received, as well as mild physical shocks. Bailey felt that the intensity and mild discomfort of the simulator closed the separation between the visitor and the experience, “bringing your whole self to that experience,” doing so quickly, and that this closeness could elicit empathy. Since visitors only spend a relatively short amount of time in the museum, a priority was to figure out how to elicit empathy in these conditions. A virtue of the lunch counter simulator being multisensory (sound from the headphones and movement of the stool) was that, “it kind of tears that veil away so that there isn’t as much space between who you are as an individual and what you’re experiencing within the exhibition.” Bailey said that this was key to eliciting empathy within the bounds of a museum visit, and referenced collaborating with theater professionals to complete this approach.

But while it attempted to produce an echo of an emotional state of a protestor, the simulator did not use the n-word. Bailey mentioned that the n-word may be a trigger for some and for others pull them back intellectually from the experience. Bailey commented that this separation was opposite of the exhibition’s intention, which was, “to get really into the most people without pulling them back intellectually from themselves,” and cautioned that museum professionals should not assume that all visitors respond in the same way. This suggests that even with a sense of racialized violence lost in the simulation, a sense of violation would not be, and that the latter was what more people could relate to and benefit from.

At the Tenement Museum, first-person experiences, place-based immersion, and storytelling, as seen in the museum’s living history programs and tenement tours, were the means to empathy. In the living history programs, visitors were tasked with getting information from costumed interpreters. Bader found that, “the fact that you have a role that requires you to get

something from that person changes the dynamic in terms of the experience.” This made the dynamic less about judgment or an *us or them* mentality, and more about working with the interpreters. In the tenement tours, the intimate setting of being in someone’s home and inviting visitors to personalize the tour brought them closer to the experience of the immigrant stories.

Bader also stated that place-based immersive experiences contributed to an intimacy or realness that was seen as an antecedent to the Tenement Museum’s observation of empathy. For educators, this also included, “framing the questions they’re asking, how they’re inviting visitors into the tour, how they’re creating opportunities for visitors to co-construct the story. It’s an active process throughout.” Allowing visitors to make the tours personal closed the gap between the visitors and the people at the center of the immigrant stories.

At Kidsbridge, explicit perspective-taking instructions were used to encourage students to draw upon past experiences and place them in their current setting. However, Azarchi stressed, “we have to be very careful. We have a script, we have an activity, and we measure it. And if it’s not statistically significant, it’s not working, we rework it.” To ensure effectiveness in the time of a visit, the exhibitions were scripted and guided. Azarchi believed that empathy elicitation required encouraging the students to imagine their experiences or how it felt when they were treated in a way similar to the person-centered example being studied. That is, the students who visited Kidsbridge imagined themselves in other people’s perspectives. Azarchi made the distinction between this type of imagine-self perspective-taking and an imagine-other perspective-taking. When dealing with students, such instructions to get them to empathize would be, “remember a time you’ve been bullied, left out, called a name, excluded. What is that feeling?” From there (which resembled Mendoza’s (1997) recommendations for perspective-taking), the students were encouraged to draw upon past experiences and place them in their

current setting, coming to a fuller understanding of the situations of others. This included using person-first language to emphasize the individuality and humanity of the people being discussed.

Looking at the responses and observing the sites, time was factored into empathy elicitation as well, meaning that the museums were realistic when it came to what they could accomplish in the span of a visit. And it seemed that the exhibitions designed to elicit empathy required a degree of affect that was monitored. Ideally, when attempting to elicit something like empathy, visitors may feel discomfort after the experiences, but leaving with personal distress as opposed to recognizing the distress of others may indicate misinterpretation of the exhibitions. This starts with the museum design and atmosphere, trickling down to the framing of the exhibitions and the exhibitions themselves.

In addition, active involvement and relatability in these experiences were desired to garner a new perspective and a path toward empathy for another. Each museum set the terms of engagement for their visitors to elicit empathy, while understanding that people responded differently to certain techniques and their own empathy. To accommodate visitors' differences, opportunities were available to *personalize others* rather than present statistics or general information. This included The Center's immersive lunch counter simulator, the Tenement Museum's place-based storytelling and co-construction, and Kidsbridge's person-first language and perspective-taking activities, all of which seemed to close the gap between ourselves and another. Getting people involved was crucial to eliciting empathy, as well as having visitors bring another's situation to their own context.

#### **IV. Outcomes of an Increased Focus on Empathy**

While the interviewees saw positive outcomes as a result of an increased focus on empathy in museum practice, it is worth mentioning that they acknowledged the limits of what empathy (as one way of connecting) could achieve within the constraints of a museum visit. In any case, setting up certain situational conditions could increase the chances of the outcomes being successful, at least for a time. Dina Bailey envisioned the outcomes of empathy at The Center being a way for visitors to broaden their perspectives. Talking about the lunch counter simulator, Bailey felt that visitors coming out of that experience would understand themselves and other people better, and in particular, “understand their connection to people who are on either side of the sit-in counter,” while understanding, “the connection to the relevance of what is happening today.”

Bailey also believed that historical empathy could inform how we act in the present. Bailey said, “if we had learned about empathy, if we had learned about our history, if we had learned those things as young people...we wouldn’t be dealing with some of the violence that we see today.” Through empathy, we can foster a deeper understanding of the past and present and, as a result, change our decision-making that may otherwise take us down paths of prejudice, bigotry, and violence. Bailey felt that this could lead to, “a citizenry that is willing to positively act and act in a way that is better for all humankind.” This would require, “empowering people to actually take action,” which The Center attempted to facilitate by providing visitors with handouts that had resources for visitors to explore along with debriefs and talking points with family and friends.

At the Tenement Museum, Miriam Bader hoped that empathy could make people, “more well-rounded, thoughtful adults, human beings,” and that by doing so, our humanity and

understanding of another's humanity would be positively reinforced. The unique quality to empathy, Bader believed, would be in its allowance of people to, "change the way they look at this issue...I do think there's a power in going from a personal story and that particular story to understanding universals." Speaking about the Irish Outsiders tour, Bader felt that these two areas worked closely together, stating, "you can connect on a personal level to Bridget and then that can let you have an emotional connection to immigrants, to a larger topic that's more universal than the particular story you've heard," meaning the connections made at the Tenement Museum could lead to other realizations about particular events.

Lynne Azarchi at Kidsbridge saw empathy as a motivating emotion that galvanized people to take action, from being a bystander to what Kidsbridge referred to as an upstander. In this sense, empathy had a hand in learning. Azarchi claimed, "if you can produce empathy in a child...they're going to learn better." If empathy was elicited, then learning could be built on that emotion. This suggests that there may be an explicit place for emotions in learning, that if we consider the openness that something like empathy evokes, it may allow us to understand distant others and build on that. Or if we consider the paths to empathy, that those in themselves develop learning skills. At Kidsbridge, empathy was deemed as a way to get students to learn and do so meaningfully. This included providing students with, "action, strategies, tactics," and showing them that they are capable of making changes in their lives, with Kidsbridge acting as, "a springboard so they go back to the school and either through the kids' drive or the teachers' or a combination they go back and actually do things."

Based on the interviews, the outcomes of empathy were believed to be enriching to visitors and a society. Essentially, empathy could be a start to applying knowledge across contexts and discovering how we live in relation to others, past and present, in addition to a

fuller understanding of ourselves. All three museums, and explicitly Kidsbridge, believed empathy to be a learning tool, and each museum functioned, to a certain extent, based on how they wanted to project empathy. While the Tenement Museum focused on looking to the stories of the past in the hopes that they could influence our perspectives in the present, The Center and Kidsbridge had similar goals, on top of which was taking part in change, whether in the visitor's immediate surroundings or against systemic oppressions. At the Tenement Museum, this required looking to the past and recognizing how it related to the present, that our understanding of past experiences can change our perception of those today. In contrast to The Center and Kidsbridge, the Tenement Museum did not seem as focused on future action. The Center and Kidsbridge seemed to be more forward thinking, recognizing not only the wrongdoings of the past, but ways to ensure that they did not happen again. Whereas Kidsbridge instructed students towards empathy in an attempt to have them take part in changes in their immediate surroundings, The Center did this on a grander scale, targeting systemic oppression and injustices across the world.

## **V. Implications for Museum Practice**

### **Reference Definitions of Empathy**

These findings reiterate that empathy occupies a constellation of conceptions, words, and phrases, which calls into question the bounds of empathy. Although the interviewees did not provide definitions in terms of *what* empathy was, it did not preclude them from having an understanding of how empathy could be valuable to their practice. Empathy, because of the space it occupies, could still be understood and evoked without of a robust foundation of conceptual vocabulary. It is then worth wondering what could be gained from adhering to some

of the studies of empathy and their corresponding definitions. As empathy continues to be explored by some museum professionals, it may be a matter of using empathy as an umbrella term, with each museum choosing the qualities of empathy that best suit its mission. Ideally, reference definitions would be created that align with a museum's goals and included in strategic plans. As these findings suggest, the concept of empathy is not fully articulated by some museum professionals, which may also bring into question what is being identified as empathy.

### **Determining When to Employ Empathy**

Regardless of museum type, a host of factors must be considered before employing empathy, namely, when empathy is employed. For example, there may be cases where certain figures are not deserving of empathy, such as the organizers of genocide. While it may be right for the ideal agent to empathize with such individuals, it may end up that this project has little practical gain. It may, too, be wrong to promote perspective-taking with those who have undergone immense suffering, such as holocaust victims. Although there may be cases where empathizing with such victims provides unique insight, a museum should be pragmatic and not always rely on the principle of applying empathy. Complicating matters, it is worth considering that empathy may not provide an accurate understanding of another's situation. For instance, it may be that our perceived understanding of another's situation is not what that other considers their situation to be. Therefore, a museum must conduct thorough research of a situation before employing empathy in this way.

A museum may also want to consider how empathy exists in relation to other emotions. For example, it is reasonable to suggest that civil rights protestors, such as those depicted at The Center, were motivated by anger. Anger can be connected to empathy in certain situations,

although anger may indicate that someone should be punished, and in complicated matters appealing to anger may not be appropriate even if it is positively motivational. Exploring this may lead to a greater understanding of the motivational forces of empathy.

### **Empathy Elicitation and Perspective-taking**

In regards to empathy elicitation and perspective-taking, a museum should consider how it fits into their practice and do it on their terms. However, it's worth recognizing that although Kidsbridge was the only museum to explicitly promote perspective-taking, The Center and the Tenement Museum had exhibitions that tacitly encouraged considering another's perspective. For example, the lunch counter simulator and the living history programs and tenement tours offered a vicarious experience of either civil rights protestors (via simulation) or immigrants at 97 Orchard Street (via entering a home or engaging with a costumed interpreter). As spaces designed to educate people through exhibitions, primarily with collections, museums regularly endorse understanding history and its agents. Thus, empathy elicitation and perspective taking can be integral to museum practice, even if a museum places little value in empathy. If a museum worries about the consequences of unrestricted empathy, this is within reason. Empathy is fallible and susceptible to our own development. But the nature of the understanding arrived at through empathy and perspective-taking allows for a fuller, and ultimately more accurate picture of the shared experiences between people, and museums have been and should continue to be grounded in these commitments regardless of empathy's drawbacks.

Perspective-taking requires a degree of alienation from our own perspective, as well as the ability to consider different worldviews. Ideally, in getting away from ourselves, we can become closer to another person. However, full perspective-taking is impossible, without the

erasure of identity, making perspective-taking limited. Related, a museum should make sure that a perspective-taking activity does not encourage a vicarious thrill or a trivial identification that undermines its intentions. This area of study in museum practice is developing, so a museum should note the ways to ineffectively promote perspective-taking, highlighting the difference between doing it the wrong way and doing it the right way badly, as well as recognizing what conditions or cognitive states inhibit empathy development. Doing so can elevate the application of empathy in museum practice, even if we find that there are better ways to elicit empathy.

There may also be questions about this approach in terms of visitor engagement. While it seems that museums have missed the opportunity for explicitness as far as empathy elicitation is concerned (and the belief that we have a greater potential for empathy when confronted with it), it may be that having visitors adjust themselves to a museum space, and not meeting visitors on their terms, can be manipulative or coercive. The dilemma is that if empathy elicitation is too subtle, it may not be noticed, and if it is too forced, it may be rejected. And if instructions weigh too heavily on either similarity or difference, prejudice may result.

In regards to simulations and immersive activities, such as The Center's lunch counter simulator and the Tenement Museum's place-based immersion, it is important to note that a high intensity of affect or immersion does not ensure elicitation of empathy and that too much immersion may falsely imply unity with the subjects represented. For the latter it is important to acknowledge that the recreated experience and the actual experience are different, and present the exhibit content accordingly (which both The Center and the Tenement Museum did by providing spaces for visitors to debrief with docents and educators). Also, visitors responding with *I feel in distress*, and not *those people were truly threatened*, may indicate a misinterpretation of the exhibition. The aspiration is that the exhibition provides enough

emotional intensity without leading to the former response. Furthermore, there may be worries that immersion or simulation would not be effective after multiple visits because of desensitization (Campbell, O'Brien, Van Boven, Schwarz, & Ubel, 2014). Therefore, exhibits like these should remember to focus on the perspective gained from the experience, not just enduring the exhibit.

Moreover, considering the diversity of visitors, empathy elicitation approaches may not influence visitors in the same way, ultimately affecting how outcomes are realized. An individual will always be able to resist experiencing empathy, no matter how compelling the situational conditions are. This is in addition to the internalization and reinforcement of empathy, which may not occur in the time that a visitor spends in a museum. Therefore, a museum may want to think of its contribution as only part and not overstate the possibilities of eliciting empathy in a museum and the likelihood of its outcomes.

### **Personalizing Others and Justice**

The interviewees and museum sites illustrated that personalizing others, rather than presenting statistical data, was a way to elicit empathy. There is reason then to believe that for empathy elicitation, balancing a museum's terms of engagement and visitor input is a practical and effective approach. This includes personalizing others through storytelling, perspective-taking, and an arrangement of a museum site, while providing options for visitors to co-construct the experience. Personalizing others places the visitor in proximity to the shared humanity with another. Even if a museum does not have such options already in their exhibitions, it seems that it can still be applied through educators and other materials. Such an approach, if desired, could personalize individuals that exist as members of disenfranchised groups. This is relevant to the

current interest in museums as agents of social change (to improve well-being and decrease suffering), due in part to a museum history that has been complicit in propagating imperialistic views (Kaplan, 2011), at times distorting others and their material cultures in arrogant perception. Which is to say that the potential for this to reoccur may still exist. Therefore, it may be valuable to include empathy and perspective-taking in museum practice so as to prevent these past conditions from reoccurring and promote solidarity with victims of injustice. Injustice arguably begins with an absence of empathy, thus using empathy in museum practice may highlight such cases. Moreover, the previous definition of empathy offered in this research, *feeling with another and comprehending their situation, that is motivationally active*, may find itself suited to areas of justice, not only to illuminate injustice but also undermine risky forms of justice.

This is distinct from offering policies or judgments. Doing so prejudices debates, and may put employees in a difficult position. And, generally, it is beyond the scope of most museum professionals' skillsets to grapple with justice on its own terms, as their skillsets are separate from those of political theorists. There are certain bounds of advocacy and expertise that museums should adhere to, but they may also want to consider that there is a right to respect views until they disrespect humanity, and not shy away from discussions that grapple with this idea.

### **Museum Pedagogy and Consensus**

Perhaps a museum ought to look at the potential outcomes of employing empathy, as well as its own goals, mission, and values, to determine how empathy is relevant to its museum practice. But the end goal should not just be to elicit empathy, for empathy, while intrinsically

valuable, has instrumental value that should be tapped into and guided by a museum. A museum should not believe that empathy in itself always leads to an effective instrumental result, and instead present visitors with options going forward by constructing open-ended exhibitions that encourage a continual pursuit of knowledge. Whether in the form of hope, that being involved in change is possible, or that people have control over outcomes, empathy's motivational qualities can impact human relations. This may require spaces for dialogue to take place, as discussion may be where the internalization and reinforcement of ideas occur.

Finally, empathy was expressed as a tool for learning, that emotions could be a means to knowledge and a motivator of action. With focus on STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Math), empathy and the emotions may come to occupy a new area of museum learning. Lynne Azarchi made it clear that a focus on STEM made the inclusion of empathy as a learning tool dependent on research that could support this view. More research is needed to determine to what extent empathy, or an approximation of it, was elicited by museum exhibitions, and if visitors felt a certain empathy at some point during and after their time at a museum. From there, it may be constructive for the museum community to approach a consensus on empathy in museum practice, both descriptive and normative. This would also make empathy's definition(s) clearer by highlighting common denominators, which would in turn inform new research. Consensus seems to imply a narrowing of ideas, but collecting, organizing, and studying the constellation of empathy would benefit the field if it were accessible.

## **Chapter 5: Conclusion**

This research explored the museum community's interest in empathy and attempted to contribute to a fuller understanding of empathy in museum practice. Although museum

professionals have discussed the relationship between empathy and museums, there were features of empathy missing from these discussions in terms of definitions, approaches and methods for eliciting empathy, and outcomes of an increased focus on empathy.

Most notably, empathy is believed to be one of the catalysts that contributes to altruistic motivation, prosocial behavior, and an interconnected understanding of others and ourselves (Batson, 2011; Eisenberg & Miller, 1987; Vetlesen, 1994). These abilities can allow us to recognize the humanity of individuals that makeup worlds we may rarely, if ever, travel to, and they can be used to ensure injustices are not doomed to repeat. Perspective-taking, too, as a type of empathy elicitation, can facilitate these benefits of empathy. Some museum professionals have expressed interest in museums as agents of social change, and the adaptability of empathy and perspective-taking may appeal to these museum professionals.

The interviews conducted for this research provided practical application of empathy, not just the theory that supported it. This included ways to prime, elicit, maintain, and follow up empathy in a museum context. Using the interviews with the three museum professionals, and an analysis of the interview data, this research was able to indicate that an articulation of empathy may be useful for strategic alignment, that personalizing others may be an effective approach to elicit empathy, and that empathy may have a place in museum pedagogy as a way to supplement current learning approaches.

At their best, museums and their exhibitions present knowledge, question beliefs and prevalent narratives, and entertain visitors in ways that positively impact their thoughts and actions. Helping accomplish these are a variety of skillsets museum professionals bring to the field and, generally, the free-choice learning of the museum space, giving visitors multiple ways to engage in meaning-making. Leveraging the technology of a museum, as seen at the museum

sites, can make empathy elicitation more effective. To engage with empathy, museum professionals will have to reconcile the emotion with their museum's mission, impact, values, content, and technologies, while making sure that they are offering empathy as a way to learn, and not manipulating their visitors' emotions.

Empathy requires imagination, cognitive skills, feelings, care, values, follow-through, and an acknowledgment of the limits of our knowledge. To consider these, more research is needed, along with the museum community's consensus on the subject of empathy in museum practice as a way of organizing information for the field's collective benefit. At the very least, this research sought to provide interested museum professionals with a vocabulary for discussing empathy so that they may engage with and employ it in practice. If museum professionals achieve this, a museum will not only have the capability to impact the communities it serves and the people represented in exhibitions, but how individuals interact with, relate to, and advocate for each other outside a museum.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Due to being outside the scope of this research, certain topics were not included in the literature review. In addition to how empathy functions neurologically and the ways to measure empathy (Neumann et al., 2015), these include empathy as it relates to non-human animals (Berenguer, 2010) and the environment (Schultz, 2000), and traveling exhibitions such as the Empathy Museum (“Empathy Museum”, n.d.).

<sup>2</sup> The ability to feel or know what another feels has been questioned. To know another’s feelings can be argued as an overreach of our capabilities. While imagining ourselves in another’s past experience, it can be tempting to assume that our imagined response to this imagined experience deeply resembles the actual feelings of the other person that occurred during that other person’s actual experience. Thus, we cannot know what certain complicated experiences are like until we actually go through them, and even then, the feelings can be different. According to McNabb (2005), such an argument against knowing what another feels is inaccurate. McNabb argues that one who asserts that another cannot feel what they are feeling is, “engaging in a self-defeating activity, since they would be arguing that we should not presume to know the thoughts of others, yet that is precisely what they would be doing” (para. 18). Therefore, using these grounds to argue against knowing what another feels may disprove one’s own argument.

<sup>3</sup> For Vetlesen (1994), “it is precisely the nonpresence of the addressee that necessitates the assistance yielded to empathy by the faculty of the imagination” (p. 329). Vetlesen went on state that regardless of the nonpresence of the other, “there can be no question of my ‘feeling’ how the other feels...my empathy capacity is guided by imagination to the place of the other, to the

particular context in which his or her well-being is at stake” (p. 329). Our imaginative leap into the feelings of another has it in mind their well-being, and as a result, is aware of the context from which the imaginative understanding originates.

<sup>4</sup> Batson was interested in proving that altruism, as opposed to egoism, existed as a motivator of helping behavior. However, it is worth considering that even if helping behavior motivated by empathy is regarded as egoistic it may still be valuable and worth promoting, although its long-term reliability and internalization would be debatable.

<sup>5</sup> See the upcoming publication *Fostering Empathy Through Museums*, due to be published in August, 2016.

## Appendix A

**Interview Guide for Empathy and Its Potential in Museum Practice**

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Location: \_\_\_\_\_

Interviewee: \_\_\_\_\_

Thank you for agreeing to meet. I want to confirm that you read and signed the consent form? Do you have any questions before we start? Let's begin.

I'd like to start this discussion by mentioning that empathy is a complex topic, perhaps due to its multiple definitions. It has been applied to a number of concepts and is closely related to words like compassion, sympathy, and concern. Therefore I'd like to ask you:

1. How do you define empathy as it relates to your work done at the museum?
2. Why choose empathy for museums?
3. What would you say to criticisms of empathy, for example, that say it can negatively influence our judgment?

Now that we have established an understanding of empathy:

4. What do you believe are the most effective and appropriate ways to elicit empathy in the museum? Does perspective-taking have a role in this?
5. Are there examples in your museum?
6. What was avoided to make sure it was successful?

Considering the ways to elicit empathy:

7. How do you believe perspective-taking contributes to empathy elicitation and cultivation?
8. Are there examples in your museum?
9. What was avoided to make sure it was successful?

I think there's a case to be made about museum responsibility when eliciting empathy. Eliciting empathy responsibly so as not to exploit our emotions. To offer hope and options at the end of a visit:

10. What do you see as the role of the museum in following up their elicitation of empathy?
11. Are there ways offered to continue the dialogue and avoid the full-stop of emotion after people leave the museum? For example: lectures, publications, and/or museum technology.
12. What stands in the way of empathy?

Now it seems that we are currently in a museum movement that is emphasizing social change. I think the 2015 and upcoming 2016 AAM conferences reflect this:

- 13.** What do you believe are the impacts of facilitating empathy and/or perspective-taking in the museum?
- 14.** Do you see a connection to justice or social change? Has this impacted issues relating to your exhibitions?
- 15.** Is there room for other feelings and emotions?
- 16.** What would be a success for your exhibitions?
- 17.** What are effective ways for a museum to develop responsible and appropriate practices for eliciting empathy and/or perspective-taking?
- 18.** If the museum was free from constraints, what do you think could be done?

Thank you for your time. If you have any questions, you can use the contact information provided on the sheet I have given you.

## Appendix B

**Key**

LA=Lynne Azarchi, Kidsbridge Tolerance Center

MB=Miriam Bader, Lower East Side Tenement Museum

DB=Dina Bailey, Center for Civil and Human Rights

Categories	Examples
A Way of Connecting	<p>“the core of empathy here at the museum comes from our mission statement, which uses the words, ‘to forge emotional connections,’ and those emotional connections often take the form of empathy” (MB)</p> <p>“feels like a way in which a visitor may connect better to him or herself, better to a past, and to a better understanding of that connection in the context of relevance in the world” (DB)</p>
A Way of Understanding	“that true connection and understanding of yourself and others” (DB)
An Active Expression	“an active, more than a passive, expression” (DB)
Existing on an Emotional Continuum	“will always be tied to other emotions as well” (DB)
Motivational	“is one of the drivers to do the right thing, stand up, speak out” (LA)
Walking in Another’s Shoes (i.e. Perspective-taking)	“empathy is the emotion. To me, empathy is the walking in the shoes” (LA)

Categories	Examples
Awareness of Triggers	<p>“if you heard the n-word in those first twenty seconds, it would have immediately separated you from the experience that you’re thinking about that” (DB)</p> <p>“to get really into the most people without pulling them back intellectually from themselves” (DB)</p> <p>“very cognizant and are beginning to work very proactively about the potential triggers</p>

	that not only young people, but adults would have in our space as well” (DB)
Co-construction with Visitors	“framing the questions they’re asking, how they’re inviting visitors into the tour, how they’re creating opportunities for visitors to co-construct the story. It’s an active process throughout” (MB)
Creation of an Equal, Open, and Caring Space	“they feel it’s a safe place because we’re telling them this: ‘we care about what you think’” (LA)
Evidenced-based Script	“we have to be very careful. We have a script, we have an activity, and we measure it. And if it’s not statistically significant, it’s not working, we rework it” (LA)
First-person Experience (e.g. Storytelling)	“a power to a first person experience” (MB)
Giving Explicit Instructions	“remember a time you’ve been bullied, left out, called a name, excluded. What is that feeling?” (LA)
Place-based Immersive Experience	“combination of place-based immersive experiences where there’s a story being told that’s a personal story and on all of our tours the approach we take is one of co-constructing the experience with the visitors” (MB)
Priming and Building Upon Empathy	“threading empathy” (DB)  “to have one experience and then not prep people for it but not build upon it either, is not only a lost opportunity but it is not doing justice to individuals or to the museum goals or to the exhibition” (DB)
Role-Playing	“the fact that you have a role that requires you to get something from that person changes the dynamic in terms of the experience” (MB)
Shortening the Distance Between the Visitor and the Experience	“it kind of tears that veil away so that there isn’t as much space between who you are as an individual and what you’re experiencing within the exhibition” (DB)  “the shortening of that distance” (DB)  “we’re able to get you to bring your whole self to that experience very quickly” (DB)
Use of Atmosphere, Design, Transitions	“an atmosphere that opens you up to that” (DB)

	“the way that the space is physically created I think it gives you that direction as well so that you don’t immediately feel lost” (DB)
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Table 3: Outcomes of an Increased Focus on Empathy	
Categories	Examples
Acknowledge the Complexity of Issues	“change the way they look at this issue... I do think there’s a power in going from a personal story and that particular story to understanding universals” (MB)
Avoid Bad Outcomes (e.g. Violence)	“if we had learned about empathy, if we had learned about our history, if we had learned those things as young people... we wouldn’t be dealing with some of the violence that we see today” (DB)
Deeper Understanding of Past and Present	“they understand their connection to people who are on either side of the sit-in counter, but they also understand the connection to the relevance of what is happening today” (DB)
Empowering Visitors	<p>“action, strategies, tactics” (LA)</p> <p>“a springboard so they go back to the school and either through the kids’ drive or the teachers’ or a combination they go back and actually do things” (LA)</p> <p>“empowering people to actually take action” (DB)</p> <p>“I also want people to find some type of action so that instead of being reactive or passive, we are creating a citizenry that is willing to positively act and act in a way that is better for all humankind” (DB)</p>
Finding Ways to Illustrate the Benefits of Empathy	“science and math are important and I find now that STEM is so sexy, but character, education, and empathy are not sexy. How do we make it sexy? I don’t know. I understand we have to compete” (LA)
Improved Learning (i.e. Empathy as a Learning Tool)	<p>“if you can produce empathy in a child...they’re going to learn better” (LA)</p> <p>“it’s not to tell them what to think...they learn more from each other and they learn more from themselves from hearing themselves</p>

	<p>speak. So we're guiding them on this empathy and transformational and hopefully empowering journey" (LA)</p> <p>"you can connect on a personal level to Bridget and then that can let you have an emotional connection to immigrants, to a larger topic that's more universal than the particular story you've heard" (MB)</p>
Inspiring Visitors to Learn More and to Take Action	"whether it is discovering more about a particular community, or more about yourself, that there is a sense of self-discovery by the end of your experience at the center" (DB)
Longitudinal Studies of Empathy	<p>"I want a cohort to study longitudinally and show that if you spend the time that you can make a difference" (LA)</p> <p>"learn more about how it ultimately impacts people's thinking" (MB)</p>
Recognizing Limits	"I can do everything I can in my power when they're at the museum to have a guide with them the whole time to help facilitate, but I can't take any responsibility for what they're doing after" (MB)
Well-rounded and Thoughtful People	"more well-rounded, thoughtful adults, human beings" (MB)