

Empathy, Togetherness and Familiarity: From Offline to Online *

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ABSTRACT. In this paper, I consider the role that epistemic familiarity plays in our empathetic perception and our feeling togetherness with others. To do this, I distinguish between what I have dubbed *familiarity by acquaintance* and *familiarity by resemblance* and explore their role in our empathetic experiences and various forms of feeling togetherness with others both offline and online. In particular, I resist the idea that we should caveat experiences of online empathy and online togetherness with the requirement of already being familiar by acquaintance with the relevant person in the offline world. In contrast, familiarity by resemblance appears to play a crucial role in shaping our experiences of others, emphasising that what we experience as another's expressive experience and how we experience that expressive experience is permeated by previous intersubjective encounters whether online or offline.

KEYWORDS: empathy; togetherness; familiarity; online sociality; the Internet; phenomenology

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Empathy, in the phenomenological tradition, is thought to be the fundamental way in which we encounter other people.¹ Rather than supposing that the mental life of others is tucked inside a person's brain or body, phenomenologists argue that at least some of our experiences are empathetically perceptually available to others through our expressive bodily movements, actions, gestures, and behaviour.² Empathy plays a particularly important role in phenomenological accounts of sociality, as it is taken to be a necessary condition of many other social interactions, including certain communal or we-experiences—experiences that we have *together* with others.³ Recently, I have argued that we should expand our application of empathy to the online sphere,⁴ as well as consider instances where we experience a sense of togetherness with others online.⁵

While empathy is typically described as grounding our interpersonal encounters, it is recognised that bias, prejudice, and in-group/out-group dynamics can influence our interpersonal experiences of empathy and togetherness.⁶ There has, then, been growing work done exploring what the conditions for and limits of empathy and togetherness might be. In this paper, I want to consider the role 'familiarity' plays in relation to empathy and togetherness. The motivation for this is two-fold. First, it adds conceptual clarification regarding the structure of empathy and togetherness. Second, a common (verbal) response to my work on online empathy and togetherness, is that people are open to the idea that empathy and

1 E.g., HUSSERL 1989; STEIN 1989; SCHUTZ 1967; OVERGAARD 2018; ZAHAVI 2011

2 We find a related notion expressed as direct social perception (e.g., DE JAEGER 2009; GALLAGHER 2008; KRUEGER & OVERGAARD 2013).

3 HUSSERL 1989; STEIN 1989; SZANTO 2018; WALTHER 1923; ZAHAVI 2015.

4 OSLER 2021.

5 OSLER 2020.

6 For work on non-recognition, social invisibility, and racializing perceptual habits, see AHMED 2007; DALY ET AL. 2020; HONNETH 2001; FANON 2008; AL-SAJI 2014; Yancy 2017; HASLANGER 2017; HEINÄMAA & JARDINE 2021.

togetherness can occur online but *only when we are already familiar with that person in our offline lives*. This is an idea that I explore and put under pressure.

In section 1, I present the notion of empathy and togetherness, as commonly found in the phenomenological tradition. In section 2, I consider what we mean by the term “familiarity”. I highlight several ways in which we use the word “familiarity”, and home in on two epistemic uses of the term: one to indicate that we have specific (even intimate) knowledge of someone (familiarity by acquaintance), and another to indicate that something reminds us of something else (familiarity by resemblance). In section 3, I consider the role these two forms of familiarity play in empathy and experiences of togetherness in the “offline” world. In section 4, I present a summary of the claims that we can empathetically perceive and experience togetherness with others online. In section 5, I consider the role familiarity might play when we consider empathy and togetherness in the online sphere. In particular, I show that while familiarity plays a role in this context, it is not a familiarity with others that must be first established in the offline world. I conclude that if one wants to maintain that familiarity with someone offline is necessary for all forms of online empathy and togetherness, one would be better off rejecting my account altogether.

1. Empathy and togetherness offline

1.1. Empathy

The term *empathy* is used by phenomenologists to pick out a special form of other-directed act.⁷ It is not intended to pick out a feeling for or sharing in the emotion of the other. Rather, it is used to describe the fundamental way in which we encounter other embodied subjects and their experiences. Empathy proponents emphasise that we do not find

7 E.g., HUSSERL 1989; JARDINE 2015; MAGRÌ AND MORAN 2018; OVERGAARD 2018; SCHUTZ 1967; STEIN 1989; SZANTO 2015; WALTHER 1923; ZAHAVI 2015, among many others.

ourselves in a world littered with the physical bodies of others but in a world of «experiencing subjects external to us, of whose experiences we know».⁸ How, though, can we become acquainted with and know the experiences of these experiencing subjects; experiences that they live through subjectively that I do not have direct access to?

It is here that the notion of empathy comes into play. Building on the commitment to the idea that subjects are not minds, souls, or spirits encased and concealed by a material body but are properly speaking embodied subjects, phenomenologists typically rebut the idea that we do not have access to others' experiences (at least in some instances). The argument is that when I see your smile or hear your laughter, I do not need to guess, infer, or project what those muscle movements and sounds might mean or indicate about your experience. Rather, I see and hear your happiness *in* your grin and giggling; your happiness is perceptually given to me «directly, unmediated, and non-inferentially».⁹ Rather than approaching the physical body as something that gets in the way of the other's experience, phenomenologists attend to the lived body (our body which we live, express and act through) as a «field of expression»¹⁰.

Note, though, that this claim that we can empathetically perceive the experiences of others in their expressive subjective bodies, is not a claim that we experience others' experiences in the same way as they do. When I empathetically perceive your joy, it is given to me precisely as yours and not as mine. Nor is this a claim that we can empathetically perceive all of another's experiences; it is possible that many experiences that a subject has are not expressed in their bodily movements and actions. Nor is this to suggest that we empathetically perceive others' experiences correctly; this is a claim about *how* we experience others, not a claim about how well we do this. I might, for instance, mistake my sister's grimace for a smile of pleasure as she looks at the garish unicorn notebook I've given her. Finally, while

8 STEIN 1989, 5.

9 ZAHAVI 2014, 125.

10 SCHUTZ 1967, 22.

empathy is put forward as the fundamental way in which we grasp others as experiencing subjects, this is not proposed as our only form of social understanding.¹¹ I might empathetically grasp my sister as an experiencing subject and perceive her happiness in her grin, while *inferring* that she is excited because it is her birthday tomorrow and *imagining* that she is doubly happy because her last birthday happened in a lockdown.

1.2. Communal experience and togetherness

When phenomenologists talk of togetherness, they typically are not referring to our simply being physically together with others but to experiencing a *feeling* of togetherness with others. It is not a sufficient condition of feeling togetherness to merely share physical space with others. I might feel deeply alone while being in the middle of a crowd.¹² Indeed, as we will see, being physically present with others is not even a necessary condition for feeling a sense of togetherness with them. Nor does our empathetic perception of others necessarily involve a sense of togetherness with others either. I might empathetically grasp the amusement of others, while being offended by the joke that they found so funny and feeling a deep sense of disconnection from them. Empathy, therefore, does not entail togetherness.

In recent years, there has been a resurgence of interest in the notion of shared or communal experiences—experiences that one has together with others as a “we”.¹³ Here, I draw from the work of Gerda Walther. My motivation for doing so is that Walther provides a particularly nuanced account of communal experiences, distinguishing between different forms of communal experience and feelings of togetherness.¹⁴ What does Walther mean by the phrase

11 ZAHAVI 2014.

12 ROBERTS & KRUEGER 2020; TIETJEN & FURTAK 2021.

13 SZANTO & MORAN 2015, SALICE & SCHMID 2016.

14 WALTHER 1923, 48-9.

«communal experiences»? Like other phenomenologists,¹⁵ she is referring to experiences that we have together with others; experiences where we are not merely aware of others, or doing something in parallel with them, but feel a sense of unification with them, where we would talk of “us” or “we”. This is the notion of togetherness that I will focus on in this paper.

A favoured example in the literature of a communal experience is of watching a movie with someone in a way in which we want to describe as watching the movie *together*.¹⁶ For us to experience this as a shared experience together as a “we”, Walther suggests we need to: (i) share the same intentional content—we need to be attending to the *same* movie if we are to be said to be watching it together, (ii) be mutually and reciprocally aware of one another—we can’t experience watching the movie as a “we” if we are not aware of one another’s presence, (iii) reciprocally effecting or influencing one another’s experience—this does not mean a physical, chemical or physiological effecting (e.g. bumping into someone, passing on a cold to them) but influencing one another’s lived experience and behaviour, for instance finding the movie funnier when watching it with the other. Walther, though, explicitly claims that these conditions are not sufficient to feel oneself part of a “we. The final ingredient is that (iv) we *feel* a sense of unification or togetherness with the other(s): «Only through its inner connectedness, that feeling of belonging together...a social formation turns into a community».¹⁷

This togetherness is «not an act of cognition or a judgment»¹⁸ but an affective, felt sense of connectedness. This felt sense of togetherness is described, rather poetically, by Walther as «a warm, affirmative mental wave of lesser or stronger power, more or less suddenly and forcefully or calmly and mildly»¹⁹ that flows through the subject. Note that this is not meant to indicate fusion with the other, where we are

15 HUSSERL 1993; STEIN 1989; SCHUTZ 1967.

16 ZAHAVI 2015; OSLER 2020.

17 WALTHER 1923, 32.

18 WALTHER 1923, 33.

19 WALTHER 1923, 33.

unable to distinguish between me and you. Rather, it is a sense of the other's experience belonging also to you and vice versa, of being united together. This kind of experience, where these interlocking acts are met, is described as an Actual We-Experience. While empathy is not sufficient to feel togetherness with others as we, it is a prerequisite for these Actual We-Experiences; allowing us to establish that we are mutually, reciprocally aware of one another, attending or feeling the same thing, and feeling a sense of unification *together*.

Walther goes on to suggest that a feeling of togetherness or unification with others can persist after a specific Actual We-Experience passes. She describes how our sense of togetherness is «not merely a current unifying-of-oneself-with-another, but it can also be *habitual*».²⁰ This can happen when the feeling of togetherness does not disappear but becomes sedimented as a feeling «present in the background of the subject, albeit ever so indeterminately».²¹ We might still feel a sense of togetherness with our friends or family even when we are not currently sharing in an experience together.²² As Calcagno expresses it: «Friends, lovers or members of a group may dwell together, without exchanging words or signs. But they know they are together as one».²³ Let us call this persisting sense of togetherness a Sedimented Togetherness.²⁴

Walther also discusses cases of togetherness with others that do not presuppose an empathetic face-to-face encounter. She describes how we can feel a togetherness or unification with “people, who also...”. By this, she means that we can feel ourselves to be part of a community together with others who share the same interests, values, goals, and so on. For instance, I might feel part of a community with people who also love Chloe Zhao movies or people who also are

20 WALTHER 1923, 68.

21 WALTHER 1923, 68.

22 CAMINADA 2014; OSLER 2020.

23 CALCAGNO 2012, 100.

24 We might be reminded here of Max Scheler's discussion of life-community (*Lebensgemeinschaft*), which is characterised by a feeling of togetherness or solidarity with others that saturates the community at large. For a rich discussion of the varieties of togetherness found in Scheler's work, see SCHLOSSBERGER 2016.

academics. In these instances, Walther suggests that mutual awareness and reciprocal effecting between members of a community can be indirect. For instance, she gives an example of academics who feel a togetherness as a community who know of and influence one another through their written work. This allows us to conceive of a broader notion of togetherness, beyond the fleeting Actual We-Experiences we might have.²⁵ Let us call this an Indirect Togetherness.

2. Familiarity

2.1. Three forms of familiarity

What role does familiarity play in relation to our experiences of empathy and togetherness? While familiarity is a word that we use frequently in our day-to-day lives, we can distinguish three different uses of the term:

Practical familiarity: we might talk of how we are familiar with a Fujifilm X-1 camera model. When used in this manner, we are picking out that we have a practical know-how regarding how to use this camera, i.e., we are familiar with the way the camera works. We might also think of how we describe being familiar with a city in terms of knowing how to navigate its confusing streets.

Affective familiarity: we sometimes use the word familiar in terms of something *feeling* familiar to us. For example, Matthew Ratcliffe describes how our everyday experience of the world is often marked by the existential feeling of familiarity, of finding a world in which we are comfortable, that we take for granted while we get on with our everyday

25 For a more extensive analysis of Walther's communal experiences see: CALCAGNO 2012; CAMINADA 2014; LUFT 2018; SZANTO 2018; ZAHAVI & SALICE 2016; LEÓN AND ZAHAVI 2016; OSLER 2020; WILDE 2021.

concerns.²⁶ This feeling of familiarity is positively valenced, as a feeling of being at home or having a certain «warmth».²⁷

Epistemic familiarity: we also use the word familiarity to pick out a sense of recognition, that something seems familiar to me because I recognise or know it in some particular way, e.g., when we talk of someone or something being familiar to me. This form of familiarity derives from my being acquainted with someone or something. Note that this epistemic use of the word familiarity is not meant to be divorced of affectivity (think how different it feels to look at someone you recognise in contrast to someone you don't). However, unlike what I have dubbed affective familiarity, this does not have to have a positive valence—I can be as epistemically familiar with my sister as with my nemesis while being overjoyed to see one and dejected to see the other.

2.2. Epistemic familiarity

In this paper, I take as my focus epistemic familiarity and explore the role that this has in our experiences of empathy and togetherness. Before we proceed, though, we should make two further distinctions within the category of epistemic familiarity:

Familiarity by acquaintance: We often describe ourselves as being familiar with someone or something in the sense of having some kind of specific or intimate knowledge about them. We can see this in the following exclamations: “Yes, I am familiar with Shaylee, I’ve known her for years” or “Let’s go to this bar I am familiar with from my student days”. Here,

26 RATCLIFFE 2008. This *feeling* of familiarity, it is suggested, might be disrupted in certain disorders such as schizophrenia, where the world is experienced as unfamiliar and lacking meaning (SASS & RATCLIFFE 2017). From this we might conclude that this background sense of familiarity with the world is important for all our intersubjective experiences, for where it is lacking there may be a breakdown in meaning that jeopardises even our fundamental empathetic grasping of others as embodied subjects.

27 CAMINADA 2014.

we use the term familiar to indicate a specific (even intimate) acquaintance with someone or something.

Familiarity by resemblance: We also use the word familiar when we want to indicate that something reminds us of something else. Consider the following declarations: “Huh, that stranger looks really familiar to me” or “The smell of the bakery is familiar, it smells like Copenhagen”. Here, we use the word familiar not to indicate specific acquaintance with that thing but to indicate that we know something *like* it.

On first glance, we seem to use the epistemic sense of familiarity in two quite different ways—one to indicate actual knowledge of someone or something and the other to indicate that we know something or someone like something else. These two senses might even strike us as being contradictory, as familiarity by acquaintance requires us to be directly acquainted with someone for them to be familiar to us, whereas familiarity by resemblance only requires us to be indirectly acquainted with something that is like what we are currently perceiving.

However, both the acquaintance and the resemblance use of familiarity relate to a sense of *recognition* that one has, either specifically (acquaintance) or transitively (resemblance). In familiarity by acquaintance, I am familiar with someone when I know them specifically and becoming more familiar with someone or something involves knowing more about that person, thing, or place; whereas in familiarity by resemblance, something or someone seems familiar to me to the extent that something about them reminds me of something or someone else. So, when a stranger strikes me as familiar, it might be that the shape of their mouth and eyes reminds me of someone else’s mouth and eyes. It is not, then, that the stranger is specifically and totally familiar to me but that certain aspects of them resemble something or someone else that I am specifically familiar with.²⁸ We

²⁸ Indeed, we might think of the shared root of the word familiar with the word family and how it is employed by WITTGENSTEIN (2010) to talk about family resemblances.

can, then, reconcile these two seemingly different uses by thinking of familiarity as something that happens on a spectrum from known to not known. Nevertheless, while admitting that these concepts lie on a spectrum, it is useful to have these two concepts in hand while considering the role familiarity might play in empathy and togetherness.

3. Familiarity, empathy, and togetherness offline

3.1 Familiarity and empathy

How, then, should we think about the relationship between familiarity, empathy, and togetherness? Let's start with empathy. First, familiarity by acquaintance is not a prerequisite for our empathetic perception of others. I can empathetically perceive the sadness of a stranger without ever having met them personally. Indeed, if familiarity by acquaintance were a prerequisite for empathy, it is difficult to get the notion of empathy off the ground at all. For my becoming familiar with you and your sadness requires me first to have had an empathetic perception of you and your sadness. We would, then, be stuck in a circular chicken/egg scenario.

Familiarity by acquaintance, then, does not seem to be *necessary* for empathy. Nevertheless, being familiar with someone by acquaintance can *improve* our empathetic perception of another. For instance, imagine that when irritated my sister becomes very polite. When someone is being rude to her, she may appear to them to be very calm and stoic. However, being familiar with the way that my sister expresses irritation and anger, I empathetically perceive her expressive behaviour not as polite but as annoyed. My familiarity with her expressive contours, «style»²⁹, and «emotional repertoire»³⁰ enriches my empathetic perception of her, and also makes it more

29 MERLEAU-PONTY 2012; STEIN 2000; STERN 2010.

30 VON MAUR 2021.

likely that I get it right. Familiarity by acquaintance, then, might play a role not in *whether* I empathetically perceive the other but in terms of *how well I do so*. Indeed, this fits our common experience of grasping the expressive experiences of those we know well with more nuance and accuracy.

However, while we can still empathetically perceive a stranger without being familiar by acquaintance with them, familiarity by resemblance does play a role in our empathetic perception of them. For instance, I might see a stranger responding to an aggressive individual with politeness and calmness which I recognise as familiar to how my sister responds in such a situation. As such, I might empathetically perceive (whether rightly or wrongly) their polite tone and their quiet manner *as* annoyance based on their style seeming familiar to me. My empathetic perception of this stranger is shaped by my familiarity with another person acting in a similar way in this kind of situation. Our empathetic perception does not happen in a vacuum but is shaped and influenced by previous empathetic experiences.

The idea that our empathetic perception is influenced not only by my specific knowledge of others but what I take to be *typical* ways of behaving in certain situations is famously discussed by Alfred Schutz in terms of «typification».³¹ We do not empathetically perceive gestures, bodily expressions, tones of voice, and so on, afresh each time we encounter a subject of experience, rather my empathetic grasp of the other is influenced by my familiarity with particular *styles* of expression. The stranger's curt politeness is empathetically grasped as annoyance by me due to my familiarity with how others customarily act in this particular kind of situation. As Taipale nicely puts it:

...already our fleeting impression of a stranger tacitly gives rise to vague expectations and preconceptions that are motivated not by our previous experience of *this* particular person, but by more impersonal and general grasp of *people*

31 SCHUTZ 1967, 184.

*like that.*³²

Our expressive styles may be idiosyncratic but they are not unique. Some forms of expressivity are thought to be near universal, for instance, the so-called basic emotions such as smiling being expressive of happiness.³³ Other forms of expressivity are culturally shaped, such as nodding and shaking one's head, particular hand gestures, ways of emotionally responding to certain situations. Both our expressivity and our empathetic perception of other's expressivity are, then, situated in broader socio-cultural historicity.³⁴ Being familiar with these emotional repertoires, styles or customs of expression permeates and shapes our empathetic perception.

It is worth asking here why I introduce the notion of familiarity when we already have the notion of type/token in the work of Schutz and Taipale. I think the benefit of the familiarity framework is that the spectrum of familiarity more obviously allows for a messiness of recognition than the type/token framework, as well as less obviously referring to the 'roles' that individuals have in society. On the type/token framework, I experience individuals as tokens to the extent that I apprehend them as specific individuals and this blurs into typification the less well I know someone. However, a stranger might strike me as familiar not because they neatly fit into a "type" (e.g., a barista or a doctor) but because various tics, gestures, styles of expression they have remind of various others. I see, familiarity, then, as a looser concept than typification.

Note, though, that familiarity can sometimes hinder our empathetic perception of others. When we are familiar by acquaintance with someone and their expressive style, we might come to expect certain expressive reactions from them in certain situations. For instance, I might expect my sister to react in a certain way based on my

32 TAIPALE 2015, 144.

33 See COLOMBETTI 2014 for a discussion of basic emotions.

34 For a wonderful discussion of how certain forms of emotional expressivity can be imposed on certain cultures, see ARCHER & MATHESON's paper on emotional imperialism (2020).

familiarity with her and this can muddy my perception of her; seeing what I expect rather than being sensitive to her actual expressive behaviour. This might particularly be the case when my familiarity with my sister's style of expression is based on a specific context (for instance, how she acts in our family home). Her style of expression might be quite different in a different context, such as at work, and my empathetic perception of her based on how I am used to her acting might lead me astray.

The same can occur in cases of familiarity by resemblance. Perceiving someone through the lens of familiarity by resemblance can be helpful when encountering those we do not personally know but it can also sometimes lead to our grasping of the other as an instigation of a type, perhaps threatening our perception of the other as an authentic, specific individual. As Merleau-Ponty astutely notes: «Others, as living beings, are constantly threatened by possible stereotyping that encloses their roles».³⁵ Moreover, our empathetic perception might be rooted in a particular cultural emotional repertoire which can lead us astray. Familiarity by resemblance, then, can hinder our empathetic grasp of the other where we either are ignorant of or not sensitive to different normative styles or repertoires of expressivity; at its core familiarity by resemblance operates on an assumption of expressive homogeneity across people and cultures. While recognising the role that familiarity by resemblance plays in shaping our empathetic perception of others, we should be careful not to place absolute trust in it. While familiarity (both by acquaintance and resemblance) can improve and enrich our empathetic perception of others, it does not necessarily do so.

3.2. *Familiarity and togetherness*

As in the case of empathy, we do not want to maintain that an Actual We-Experience with others rests on familiarity by acquaintance. Our shared experiences with others can occur with strangers in relatively

35 MERLEAU-PONTY 2010, as quoted in TAIPALE 2015.

mundane and superficial ways. I might, for instance, experience a feeling of togetherness with the woman next to me in a lecture when we share an experience of indignation at the words of the misogynistic speaker. I do not need to be personally acquainted with this woman nor her with me for us to recognise and share in this reaction. As Walther points out, Actual We-Experiences like this can be rather fleeting but nevertheless can involve a passing sense of togetherness with others.³⁶ Moreover, we should be careful not to mistake familiarity by acquaintance itself for a feeling of togetherness. I can be intimately familiar with someone who I distinctly do not feel a sense of togetherness with; think of how someone might be familiar with an aggressive and hostile neighbour while experiencing themselves as alienated by their neighbour's behaviour.

In contrast, familiarity by resemblance still plays a role in the formation of even fleeting shared experiences. In our example, I recognise the pursed lips of the woman as disapproval because I am familiar with this as an expression of annoyance and anger. Moreover, in cases where we are more familiar with the other, either in terms of being specifically acquainted with them or in terms of my recognising the other's expressivity as familiar by resemblance, this might improve the likelihood of an Actual We-Experience arising. For, a richer empathetic grasp of the other is more likely to secure the interlocking acts that Walther argues are conditions of this experience of togetherness.

While familiarity by acquaintance is not necessary for a sense of togetherness in the case of an Actual We-Experience, it is necessary in cases of Sedimented Togetherness. Remember, that this is a togetherness that we experience with others that is founded on a previous Actual We-Experience but that has become a sedimented experience of togetherness. For instance, I might experience a Sedimented Togetherness with my sister even when we aren't sharing in an Actual We-experience at that moment (even, perhaps, when my sister is not present with me). Given that the basis of this sedimented

36 WALTHER 1923, 69.

sense of togetherness is an Actual We-Experience with that other person or other people, it follows that this Sedimented Togetherness can only hold in relation to people that you are familiar with by acquaintance. I cannot feel a Sedimented Togetherness with someone I have not met before. Indeed, we might even go so far to say that the very sense of togetherness is itself something that I am familiar with by acquaintance, as Walther suggests that this is the *same* togetherness that arose in an Actual We-Experience that has become sedimented.

This is not, however, the case when we talk about an Indirect Togetherness, where we feel a sense of togetherness with “people, who also...”. Remember that we can experience this indirect sense of togetherness with others whom we are not specifically acquainted with, who we have not met in person. Rather, we might speak of a particular kind of familiarity by resemblance in these cases. Not where “people, who also...” necessarily are familiar to me because they remind me of others that I do know but because there is something about them that is familiar because they remind me of myself. I might, for instance, feel this sense of togetherness with others who I feel united with because I recognise something in them such as a familiar interest in a particular book genre, a familiar political alignment, a familiar ambition. This is a togetherness that I might experience with “*people like me*”.

4. Empathy and togetherness online

4.1. *Empathy online*

While it has typically been supposed that in order for us to empathetically perceive another, we must be physically present together,³⁷ I have argued that, in certain cases, we can empathetically perceive the other and their experience in the online sphere.³⁸ When

37 FUCHS 2014; DREYFUS 2010.

38 For a more detailed argument, see OSLER 2021.

we empathetically perceive someone, we do not attend to bodies as physical, material objects (e.g., scrutinizing muscle contractions and movements), we attend to the other's lived, expressive body (e.g., seeing smiles and waves). When we go online, while we leave our physical bodies behind, I think that we sometimes encounter the lived, expressive bodies of others.

Take encountering others on video platforms such as Zoom. What do I see when I open a Zoom room with my sister? There is her expressive face on my screen, smiling away at me, her teasing voice coming out of my speakers, and so on. Even though her expressive body is *mediated* by the screens and speakers between us, I think it is wrong to say that I am no longer able to directly and non-inferentially grasp her expressivity. Although my perception of her expressive body is mediated by screens and speakers, I see no reason to suppose that this somehow renders my grasp of her emotional experience inferential or imagined. In the same way that I do not typically attend to the muscles of her face moving, when I encounter my sister on a video screen I typically do not look at the pixels and infer what facial expression she must be making, rather I see her smile (though I can, of course, start examining the screen if I wish, in the same way I *could* scrutinise the muscle contractions of my sister's face). What is mediated here is her expressive body, not my empathetic perception; we must be careful, then, to distinguish mediated in the sense of *her lived body being technologically mediated* and the *immediacy with which I grasp her movements and behaviour as expressive*. I think, therefore, that in this context we can properly speak of a case of my empathetically directly perceiving my sister's mediated bodily subjectivity and expressivity.³⁹

What, though, about other online platforms that do not allow us to *see or hear* the other? While we might be open to the idea that we can empathetically perceive others online when we have visual and

³⁹ Note that the claim that we can empathetically perceive the other in certain online encounters should not be mistaken for a claim that our online encounters are identical to our face-to-face encounters in the offline world.

auditory access to their (mediated) expressive behaviour, we might be loath to extend this to other online mediums—particularly those that are predominately text-based, such as WhatsApp, Signal, and Telegram.

When we are instant messaging one another, we no longer seem to be dealing with a mediated body (such as on a video call) but with written signs and symbols. Indeed, this might be thought of the archetypical example of *not* having direct access to the other's expressive lived body but only to signs from which we must infer or imagine their experience. However, I think that describing our experience of reading instant messages as like reading a script, from which we must infer or imagine the other's experience, misses out on an important aspect of these experiences; the expressive dynamism that they have. When my sister is messaging me about her promotion in ALL CAPS, with lots of emojis, at a fast and frenetic pace, I am sensitive to the tone of her messages. I do not need to infer or imagine that she is happy from the words she sends but have access to her happiness in the very expressive style of her texts. Think of the contrast with the two of us having an argument on WhatsApp, where I can see that she is "typing..." and "typing..." and "typing...". The tension, the awkwardness, is there in the dynamics of her messaging and in my curt responses back to her. Crucially, I think that when I am engaged in this unfurling conversation with my sister, I do not attend to the words on my screen as signs or symbols that need to be decoded, rather I "hear" the "voice" of my sister in those messages. Indeed, if we think about reading the conversation back the next day, we experience the conversation as having something lacking; the dynamic tone that was there is gone, and we experience the messages more as a script than the unfurling chat we had the day before.

While it is certainly a more radical claim to extend empathy to interpersonal encounters that occur over instant messaging, I still think we can meaningfully talk of a limited case of empathetic perception here. While I do not have access to her physical body, I still have some access to her expressive experience *in* her texting, in a

manner akin to my seeing her happiness *in* her smile. Now this is certainly not to say that this amounts to the same kind of interpersonal encounter as a physically face-to-face one. There are any number of differences we might want to highlight; our lack of visual perception, our inability to hear, touch or taste the other. However, I think we can maintain the difference between face-to-face encounters vs. texting encounters without needing to deny that empathy is sometimes available even in our texting relations.

4.2. Communal experiences and togetherness online

Having argued for the possibility of online empathy, the possibility for having an Actual We-Experience online is opened; for, the interlocking acts are, in part, underpinned by our empathetically grasping one another. Let us use our previous example of watching a movie together and transpose this into an online setting. Imagine that my sister and I have decided to watch *Nomadland* together over Zoom—we co-ordinate starting the movie at the same time and keep our Zoom room open so that we can see and hear each other reactions and chat to one another. Here, we seem to meet the requirements of: (i) sharing the same intentional content—we are watching the same (type) movie, (ii) being mutually and reciprocally aware of another—we can see and hear one another mediated by our screens and speakers, (iii) reciprocally effecting one another's experience—our experience is changed by our watching it together, and (iv) we have an affective sense of being united in watching the movie *together*. I would go so far to suggest that these conditions could also be met even if we were not on Zoom together but texting one another while watching the movie at the same time.

What about Sedimented Togetherness? As described above, this is where we have a habitual, background feeling of togetherness with those we have shared Actual We-Experiences with previously. Calcagno described how we can dwell with our family and friends and continue to feel this togetherness with them, even though we are

not explicitly doing anything that amounts to a full-blown Actual We-Experience. Indeed, this Sedimented Togetherness need not even require that I am physically with the relevant people. It seems that this Sedimented Togetherness can also mark our “dwelling” with one another in an online context. Imagine that my sister and I have kept our Zoom room open while we are working away on our own separate projects. I think it fair to say that here we might still feel this background togetherness with one another. Indeed, we might suppose that technological means of communication opens up ways for keeping this Sedimented Togetherness alive by making it easy for us to remain within easy communicative reach.⁴⁰

When it comes to Indirect Togetherness, where we feel a togetherness with “people, who also...”, it seems that the online sphere not only allows for such experiences to occur but that it is uniquely well set up to support this kind of togetherness with others. Walther used the example of an academic community who feels a sense of togetherness or unification with one another as “people, who also...” where they are aware of one another through their letters and work. We might think of the internet as providing a particularly easy way of encountering “people, who also...”.

5. Familiarity, empathy, and togetherness online

Now, for the purposes of this paper, I am going to generously give myself the benefit of the doubt and suppose that the idea that we might empathetically perceive others online and even feel togetherness in relation to online interactions is, at least, theoretically plausible.⁴¹ As mentioned in the introduction, my claims about online interpersonal encounters have commonly been met with the response that we should only allow for the possibility of online empathy and online togetherness when we are dealing with encounters with

40 KRUEGER & OSLER 2019; OSLER & KRUEGER 2022.

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individuals *who we are already familiar with from our offline lives*; that I might empathetically perceive my sister over Zoom or WhatsApp or experience togetherness with her on these platforms with her but that we should be hesitant to extend this claim to encounters with strangers, with those who we only encounter in the online sphere. To translate this into our familiarity terminology, the response is that familiarity by acquaintance with the relevant person in the offline world is a necessary precondition for online empathy or togetherness.

5.1 Empathy and familiarity online

Let us begin by thinking through why we might want to caveat the notion of empathy online with familiarity by acquaintance with the other from the offline world. I think there are two reasons one might think that familiarity by acquaintance is a necessary condition for online empathy:

1. If we are already familiar by acquaintance with someone from the offline world, we *know* that they are, in fact, embodied subjects. If we are not already familiar by acquaintance with someone from the offline world, we might have some lingering doubt about whether they really are an embodied subject. Let us call this the *Prior Knowledge Claim*.
2. Being familiar by acquaintance with someone offline, with the way they look, the way they typically express themselves, move and sound, might be thought important for allowing us to *recognise* that person as an experiencing expressive subject online. Note that this is not about being secure in the knowledge that the image or words I perceive online actually relate to an embodied foreign subject (i.e., the *Prior Knowledge Claim*). This is the claim that our familiarity with a specific person offline is what allows me to empathetically perceive them online. To put it another way, this is not a claim

grounded in scepticism but a claim about perception. For instance, what allows me to empathetically perceive my sister on Zoom is that, although what I am looking at is quite different to looking at her in a face-to-face encounter offline, my familiarity with her smile allows me to grasp her smile on screen; that what allows me to empathetically perceive my sister via instant messaging is that the style of her texts reminds me of how she speaks offline. Let us call this the *Recognition Claim*.

Let's take these claims in turn.

5.1.1. *Prior Knowledge Claim*

According to the Prior Knowledge Claim, familiarity by acquaintance with the other offline ensures that we know that the individual we encounter on Zoom or over WhatsApp really *is* an embodied subject out there in the world. Having this prior knowledge about the other allays any doubts over whether the other is an embodied subject (e.g., rather than a sophisticated AI bot) and allows us to empathetically perceive the other in this mediated context.

Remember, though, that empathy is supposed to *reveal* the other to us as a foreign experiencing subject. If we need prior knowledge that the other is an embodied subject before we can perceive them as such online, then our perception of the other online does not seem to be based on current empathetic perception but rather on a remembered empathy that occurred offline. What this picture seems to imply is not that I empathetically perceive the other online but that I infer from the online interaction that the encounter I am having online is with an embodied subject who I have met previously offline. As such, to endorse the Prior Knowledge Claim does not add a caveat to online empathy but rather undermines the notion of online empathy altogether. If someone, therefore, wants to argue for the necessity of prior knowledge grounded in familiarity by acquaintance offline, it

seems better to abandon the notion of online empathy altogether.

5.1.2. Recognition Claim

The motivation behind the Recognition Claim rests on the idea that our encounters with others online are distinctly different to encountering them offline. When Zooming with my sister, I no longer have her in front of me *in the flesh* but see her mediated by a screen. When texting with my sister, I cannot even see or hear her, all I have access to is the dynamics of her texting and the tone of her messages. As such, we might think that what is needed for me to recognise what is on my screen *as my sister's expressive behaviour* is familiarity with my sister grounded in our offline encounters. My familiarity with the way she smiles with half her mouth when she is amused is what allows me to see the moving image on my screen *as the mediated smile of my sister*; that I only perceive her texts as having a certain tone and style because the dynamics, phrasing, and tone are familiar to me due to the way she talks offline. We can cash out this claim with our familiarity terminology as follows: I can empathetically perceive my sister's face on Zoom or dynamic texting only to the extent that what I perceive online resembles my sister's expressive styles and patterns offline - that her online expressive behaviour is *familiar to me by resemblance* in relation to her expressive behaviour offline, which I am *familiar by acquaintance* with, and this secures my empathetic perception of her.

At first glance, this seems like a reasonable caveat to add to online empathy. Particularly when we consider instant messaging, where we have such a limited access to the other and this access is in stark contrast to what we perceive in an offline face-to-face encounter. However, while this might initially appear to be a reasonable and limited caveat, I actually think it is quite a broad claim to make and, as such, is a fragile one. To unseat this claim, we need only find one case where we want to allow online empathy in relation to someone I have not previously met offline.

Now I certainly do not want to deny the importance that familiarity can play when encountering others online. Smiles on Zoom certainly

seem to resemble smiles offline. It seems that (often) what makes the dynamic style of texting with another something that I directly perceive as expressive is the resemblance between the rhythms of communication both online and offline. For instance, the rhythm of excitement tends towards the frenetic and over the top, while the rhythm of frustration tends towards the terse and matter of fact. My familiarity with these expressive styles from the offline world plays an important role in my empathetically grasping the other's expressive behaviour and experience over instant messaging. Importantly, though, this does not require that I be specifically familiar with the person I am interacting with online. I can empathetically perceive a stranger's happiness when I see them smile in our Zoom meeting even though I have never seen their "real-life" smile because it resembles other smiles that I have encountered. I can experience the instant messages sent from my landlord as terse and angry, even though I have never met him in real life, because the short, sharp messages that he is rapidly sending me resemble offline styles of angry interaction. As such, what we are dealing with here is not familiarity by acquaintance with someone offline but familiarity by resemblance. This, then, highlights the important role that familiarity by resemblance might play without going so far as to demand acquaintance with an individual offline before we can empathetically perceive them online.

Indeed, I think we should push this point even further. In the above paragraph I have highlighted how online expressive behaviour might appear to me as expressive to the extent that it resembles offline expressive behaviour. What, though, about expressive styles and repertoires that appear online that do not (obviously) resemble offline ones? We are not coming to the Internet fresh today, many of us have been engaging in online interactions with one another for well over a decade if not two. In this time, we have seen normative forms of expressivity arising on various platforms: turn-taking styles on Zoom that are different to face-to-face; the use of punctuation and emojis to inflect tone into one's messages; the move from a single long text

message to short, multiple ones. While I will not argue for this in depth here, I think it is important to consider how our empathetic perception of others online might be grounded in behaviour that is familiar by resemblance not to offline expressive practices but to online ones. My perception of my landlord's anger when he is bombarding me with texts in ALL CAPS might be shaped by the resemblance it has to the way my sister messages when she is angry. As such, being able to recognise strangers and their expressive experience online may well be informed by familiarity by resemblance but this need not always be grounded in the offline world.

Finally, I think there is a practical concern with adopting the Recognition Claim. By adding such a caveat to online empathy, this suggests that we have a bifurcated experience when it comes to experiencing people we already know offline from those we do not. Imagine attending an online seminar on Zoom with some colleagues you know from your department and some people you've never met before. If we subscribe to the Recognition Claim, we would expect you to perceive your colleagues differently to the strangers; that you could only grasp your colleagues as mediated embodied subjects with expressive experiences, while failing to see the stranger as such. Yet, this seems does not seem to be borne out in our lived experience. I do not think we have a bifurcated experience of strangers expressive behaviour on Zoom compared to those we know from offline; I can still see their mediated happiness in their smile, their embarrassment in their blushing. It, therefore, seems odd to me to suggest that we only empathetically grasp those we know from offline, while falling back onto inference or imagination in relation to those I do not know from the offline world.

While the Recognition Claim brings up some important questions about how we recognise expressive behaviour as expressive when our access to the other is not face-to-face but mediated by technology, I think the claim that online empathy requires us to already be familiar by acquaintance with someone offline is too sprawling.

5.2. *Togetherness and familiarity online*

If we are resistant to the claim that familiarity by acquaintance is necessary for empathy online, then the empathy involved in an Actual We-Experience online also does not require familiarity by acquaintance from the offline world. It seems that our example of watching a movie with someone over Zoom could give rise to an Actual We-Experience with them even if I had never met them before. We could be exchanging comments, affecting one another's enjoyment of the movie, and come to feel a sense of togetherness with one another without this being grounded in an offline acquaintance. It seems to me that this chatting together and mediated access to the other's expressive behaviour would be sufficient for allowing an Actual We-Experience to arise.

Now, it seems entirely possible that where we have familiarity by acquaintance in an online encounter, we might be more confident that we are mutually, reciprocally affecting one another and experiencing a sense of togetherness with one another. However, while this might increase the likelihood of an Actual We-Experience arising, it is not a necessary condition for it. Moreover, this is not something unique to online encounters, as discussed above we might expect an Actual We-Experience to arise more easily where there is familiarity by acquaintance in the offline world too.

Interestingly, we find some evidence of Actual We-Experiences taking place online between individuals who have not met one another offline. For instance, during Covid-19 lockdowns, many gigs moved from physical venues to online spaces. Here, the audience could all tune in to the performance at the same and, on some platforms, were able to interact via instant messages with one another.⁴² Even though they could not see or hear one another, their responsive texts meet the requirements for an Actual We-Experience; they are attending to the same concert, aware that they are present together, mutually affecting each other's experience and report feeling a sense of togetherness or unification with the others. Vandenberg et

42 VANDENBERG ET AL. 2021; ONDERDIJK ET AL. 2021.

al., in studying livestreamed gigs during Covid-19, highlight how «[c]omment sections provide the engagement needed for creating social ties and feelings of community, as they enable participants to move beyond immediate interaction with acquaintances and communicate to the audience in general»⁴³. They suggest that as the participants are watching and messaging in a shared temporal moment, this works to create a sense of presence and immediacy with the other audience members, allowing for a feeling of togetherness to emerge. Importantly, such an audience is decidedly not made up of individuals who were already familiar by acquaintance with one another. It also suggests that an Actual We-Experience might occur online with larger groups, not just in intimate dyadic or small group situations.

Turning to Sedimented Togetherness online, remember that we established above that a Sedimented Togetherness can only be experienced in relation to someone you are familiar with by acquaintance, as it is an experience that is grounded in an Actual We-Experience with another. As such, we might suppose that this kind of togetherness necessitates that we are familiar by acquaintance with the person in question from the offline world, even if we experience this sedimented togetherness with them when we encounter them in the online sphere. However, we should tweak this conclusion a little. For while we certainly need to be familiar by acquaintance with the person in question, this familiarity might arise from an Actual We-Experience that occurred online, with an individual who we are familiar with from the online sphere. Imagine that two people at the online rave stay in contact after the gig. They might have an online chat after the gig, reminiscing about the experience and feel this continued sense of togetherness with one another without the emergence of an Actual We-Experience. Their familiarity with one another based on an online interaction is sufficient to birth this continued sedimented togetherness.

Finally, when we experience Indirect Togetherness with “people,

43 VANDENBERG ET AL. 2021, 148.

who also...”, as discussed above we specifically do not need to have familiarity by acquaintance with those we feel united with. As such, there seems to be no need to impose any new conditions for this experience simply because our awareness of others who also share the same interests, and so on, arises via online means rather than offline ones.

6. Conclusion

In this paper, I have considered and explored the role that epistemic familiarity plays in our empathetic capabilities and our feeling togetherness with others. To do this, I have distinguished between what I have dubbed *familiarity by acquaintance* and *familiarity by resemblance* and applied these to empathy, Actual We-Experiences, Sedimented Togetherness and Indirect Togetherness both offline and online. In particular, I have resisted the idea that we should caveat the idea of online empathy and online togetherness with the requirement that I am already familiar by acquaintance with the relevant person in the offline world. Indeed, I have suggested that to add such a caveat does not finetune the notions of online empathy and togetherness but rather destabilises the notions altogether. For those who want to maintain that familiarity by acquaintance with someone offline is necessary for my empathetic perception or feeling of togetherness with them online, it might simply make more sense to reject my account. In contrast, familiarity by resemblance appears to play a crucial role in shaping my experience of others, emphasising that what we experience as another’s expressive experience and how we experience that expressive experience is permeated by previous intersubjective encounters whether online or offline.

I want to finish by highlighting that in this paper I have presupposed that the technology users in my examples are skilled users—users skilled with using the various platforms through which they are engaging; or, to put it in our familiarity language, I have

presupposed a certain level of practical familiarity with the technology in question. As such, something that I have not considered is the extent to which our experience of empathy or togetherness online is underpinned by a form of practical familiarity. In a related vein, I have also not considered the temporal development of our intersubjective skills and capabilities. Just as we find rich discussions about the development of our intersubjective capabilities in the offline world (e.g., the acquisition of primary, secondary, and tertiary intersubjective experience), so might we want to tell a similar story when it comes to our online intersubjective experiences—that we do not come to the online sphere with our full online intersubjective toolkit in place but we learn and develop our intersubjective capacities in this context through experience and development. While I have considered here the role that epistemic familiarity plays in some of our online intersubjective encounters, there are clearly many important questions remaining about our online social worlds to be explored in further research.

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