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Looking for Empathy in Visual Encounters

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Abstract

Empathy is fundamental in our abilities to achieve healthy, happy, socially successful lives. The importance of its inclusion in educational pedagogical practices and classroom instruction is highly emphasized, yet very little research has been conducted to examine artistic exercises as effective ways for promoting empathy through pedagogy. VTS is a dialogical form of aesthetic interview that encourages groups of students to engage critical thinking skills. This article addresses a dissertation study in which VTS was implemented as an arts-based educational research (ABER) methodology to elicit discourse. The data, comprised of an audio recorded VTS exercise, was collected during a workshop at a conference in Vienna, Austria. Participants discussed an illustration taken from Shaun Tan's *The Arrival*, a graphic novel telling the story of an Immigrant's journey. Findings illuminate how VTS exercises elicited empathic discourse and a discussion explores VTS as a pedagogy for eliciting empathy within a theoretical context.



Figure 1. Image from Shaun Tan's *The Arrival*, p.5.

Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) Questions:

“What is going on in this picture?”

What do you see that makes you say that?

What more can we find?” (Yenawine, 2013, p. 25).

Introduction: Arts Engagement in Relation to Empathetic Phenomena

There was a brief moment in history towards the end of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th century when German Romantic philosophers, namely Robert Vischer and his father Freidrich Theodor Vischer, popularized the term *einbüflung* or “feeling into” in essays written to discuss the topic of how art is idealized (Stueber, 2018). The term was later translated by Theodor Lipps into the English term *empathy*. Empathy, examined within the context of the late 19th century German Romantic psychology, is concerned more with how objects, whether human or not, can be endowed with a soul or be seen as having a life (Bridge, 2010; Jeffers, 2009). Art is a form of emotional expression, and as we engage in the creative processes of art viewing and art making, we call upon our emotional understanding of objects as we remember our lived experiences in relation to them. Robert Vischer, in his work, describes form symbolization in artistic creation as “the end product of a perceptual process that begins with the eyes and goes on to affect the entirety of our body and psyche” (Bridge 2010, p. 6). Visual Thinking Strategies is a research based pedagogical method that promotes aesthetic development and, in addition, is believed to possess great potential for fostering empathetic behaviors (Bentwich & Gilbey, 2017).

Today empathy has a number of definitions as well as the vicarious quality of being elusive. Most individuals often confuse empathy with sympathy, and though the two are closely related, they are indeed separate qualities (Batson, 2009). Empathy is the ability to understand emotions and feelings being expressed by others. It is linked to prosocial skills in adulthood (Davis, Knutson, & Rosenberg, 2016), but too much empathy can also have negative effects (Stern & Dineen, 2015). The phenomena of empathy dates back as far as ancient Greece but has only become a topic of interest to the fields of psychology and neuroscience and been empirically investigated since the early 1900’s (Stueber, 2018).

In order to understand the subtle, nuanced distinctions between over half a dozen phenomenon termed empathy, we must first examine it within its broader definition (Batson, 2009). Empathy is often regarded as “the ability to understand and share the feelings of another” (de Waal, 2008, p. 281). This definition comprises two separate constructs as defining empathy. The first component expressed is empathy’s *affective* characteristic, “share the feelings of another” (de Waal 2008, p. 281). Affective empathy can be described as having a similar emotional experience to one being exhibited by an emotional stimulus (Cuff, Brown, Taylor & Howat, 2014; Eisenberg & Strayer, 1987; Hoffman, 2000). Emotional congruence, motor mimicry, and emotional contagion are all examples of various terms used in describing this particular form of *affective* empathy (Batson, 2009; Hatfield, Cacioppo, and Rapson, 1994; Hess & Fila, 2016). Depending on the scientific field examining empathy, the primary focus may be placed only on empathy’s affective definition (Cuff et. al, 2014).

A second component of empathy illustrated in the above definition references cognitive empathy, or “the ability to understand” (de Waal 2008, p. 281), which refers to the cognitive components of empathetic phenomena. Often separated into two different underlying types of emotional reactivity, empathy is assessed as either self-oriented and/or other-oriented feelings (Eisenberg & Strayer, 1987; Hoffman, 1982, 1984). An example of an empathetic phenomena that involves cognitive empathy would include the ability to role take or “assume the perspective of another person” (Eisenberg & Strayer, 1987, p. 9; Feshbach, 1978; Hoffman, 1982).

Empathy can manifest through a variety of phenomena or behaviors (Batson, 2009). The *multiple expressive qualities of empathy* make it difficult to identify and label at times, so it is recommended that researchers work to recognize the various manifestations of empathy as different yet distinct phenomena (Batson, 2009). Examination of particular empathic phenomena not only helps us link it with a self/other display of empathetic engagement, it also allows us to connect the phenomena to empathy’s affective or cognitive attributes (Batson, 2009). This article depicts the experiences of viewers as part of a dissertation study seeking to examine Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS), a constructivist-based art viewing curriculum, as a pedagogical method with capacity for evoking empathetic phenomena amongst participants.

Imagination: A Catalyst for Empathy in Visual Encounters

Images and the act of imagining are central elements of an aesthetic experience (Dewey, 1934/2005). The 21st century, with its ever-increasing demand for images posted on to social media websites, suggests that images may also play a powerful part in the construction of our social lives (Sweeny, 2009). The ambiguous nature of images allows the viewer’s interpretations to resonate with their social-cultural understandings and associated memories (Read, 1943). Images can also provide a gateway into empathic understanding (Freedberg & Gallese, 2007).

Viewing art and discussing it socially provides those present the opportunity to experience how others come to mediate, perceive, and interpret a work of art. These experiences present opportunities for viewers to better understand both their uniqueness and similarity to others (Freedman, 2003), providing awareness that “they are part of an ongoing dialog among people, overtime, who have thought about art and their responses to it” (Stewart, 1997, p. 18). As people verbally share their perceptions of an artwork amongst a group of peers, listeners are invited to envision the artwork through the alternative personal lens of others—offering those present a chance to re-see the artwork through the discursive visualization of thought being shared with one another.

Within our imagination is where the broader construction of meanings and purposes begin (Eisner, 2002). We role-play mental images that function as displays for the possibilities, associations, and construction of our ideas. We form images in our '*mind's eye*' attempting to conceptualize possibilities or attainable outcomes. Imagining as a form of *playing with our knowledge* allows us to create and/or assign both our social and emotional experiences to the phenomena being explored (Sartre, 1940/2010).

In this study, empathy is examined within the context of an embodied aesthetic experience in which viewers transfer their emotional content onto the artwork (Vischer, 1873/1994, p. 89). Viewers imaginatively project their ideas onto the image in order to formulate a better understanding of their emotional connection to it, and they repeat engagement in this process as they listen to others do the same.

As empathy is a construct comprised of and containing numerous behaviors, would it not be wise to resist any desire to confine it to a single definition? "Navigating the world of others requires empathetic understanding of the self, as well as of the other, and an ongoing negotiation of the intersubjective relationship between the two" (Jeffers, 2009, pg. 6). To achieve this act, utilization of the imagination plays a central role (Strayer & Roberts, 1989). Socialized art viewing experiences, in the form of shared aesthetic discovery, provide a forum in which viewers can become familiar with alternative interpretations and perspectives as they are verbalized by fellow viewers (Chapman, Hall, Colby & Sisler, 2014). Exercises in which meaning is co-constructed, in regard to what messages an image might be portraying, allows participants opportunities to shift their own pre-determined perceptions in consideration of alternative ways of interpreting the image (Chapman et. al., 2014). Research has uncovered that positive correlations exist between empathy and imagination (Strayer & Roberts, 1989).

Educational research has yet to look closely at Visual Thinking Strategies' curriculum—an open-ended method for art viewing—as an approach towards fostering empathetic behaviors. This research contains a close investigation of how specific empathetic concepts, derived from Daniel Batson's (2009) article, "These Things Called Empathy: Eight Related but Distinct Phenomena," are experienced during VTS exercises. It seeks to contribute new knowledge to the discussion of pedagogy aimed at promoting 21st century skills. It examines how engagement in socialized art viewing experiences can create an environment conducive towards manifesting empathetic behaviors.

Pedagogy for the 21st century must be designed to address the development of imagination and empathy (Bandelli, 2018), and therefore this research seeks to re-examine art education's role in developing these skills. The aim of this study is to critically examine whether specific empathetic behaviors, derived from Batson (2009), manifest and are experienced by

participants engaging in a VTS exercise. Elliot Eisner and Tom Barone (2012), in their text *Art Based Research*, define ABER (Arts Based Education Research) as the “utilization of aesthetic judgment and application of aesthetic criteria in making judgments about what the intended character of the outcome is to be” (p. 8.). They posit that “the aim is to create an expressive form that will enable an individual to secure an empathetic participation in the lives of others and in the situation studied” (Eisner & Barone, 2012, p. 9).

Engaging in VTS exercises can provide students participatory opportunities to enhance empathic abilities (Bentwich & Gilbey, 2017; Rielly, Ring, and Duke, 2005) and develop aesthetically. Aesthetics, as defined through Abigail Housen’s (1999) research efforts, refers to how the viewer experiences their visual world. VTS provides students a chance to share and gain understanding as to how the other participants are experiencing the work of art being examined (Rielly, Ring, & Duke, 2005). To achieve the aim of this study, examining empathetic behaviors in connection to a VTS facilitated discussion, a VTS workshop given at an InSEA (*International Society for Education Through Art*) conference in Vienna, Austria, in 2016 was documented and analyzed.

I begin by providing a description of Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) Curriculum and explain its connection to studies of empathy development through a brief review of the literature. Next, we take a look closer into how empathetic phenomena are defined through six specific concepts illustrative of empathetic behaviors described by Daniel Batson (2009), a social-psychologist known for his work on empathy-altruism research. The methods section elaborates on how VTS was implemented during a dissertation study with the intention to examine its potential as an artistic method of inquiry for studying empathy. The results and data analysis provide details as to which empathetic phenomena were experienced and discernible among participants. In essence, I attempt to explore how the *participatory social discursive* practice situated within VTS exercises evokes empathetic phenomena in and amongst the viewers. Suggestions as to how participation in VTS manifests empathy through critical discourse are found in the summary. Ideas related to teaching practices that promote empathetic development are examined and theorized in an effort to provide pedagogical insights around using VTS sessions to elicit specific empathetic phenomena described by Batson. Seeking to deepen educators’ understanding of how empathetic behaviors manifest when visual thinking transpires, I consider the opportunities VTS affords art education pedagogy aimed at addressing social and economic development issues.

Reflect, for a moment, on your visual encounter and VTS responses to the visual encounter on page one. How does viewing the image spark empathy through imaginative approaches, and how can such visual encounters be recreated for and with learners? How would you share your emotional experiencing of the image with others, and do you project any social, cultural,

or personal connections to particular visual elements within the image? For the purposes of exploring imagination's role in visual encounters as it relates to empathetic phenomena, visual thinking was elicited through group participation in a VTS exercise. Daniel Batson's (2009) article "These Things Called Empathy: Eight Related but Distinct Phenomena" was used in sourcing specific examples of empathetic concepts. This study used six concepts derived from Batson's eight, as illustrated in Figure 2 below.

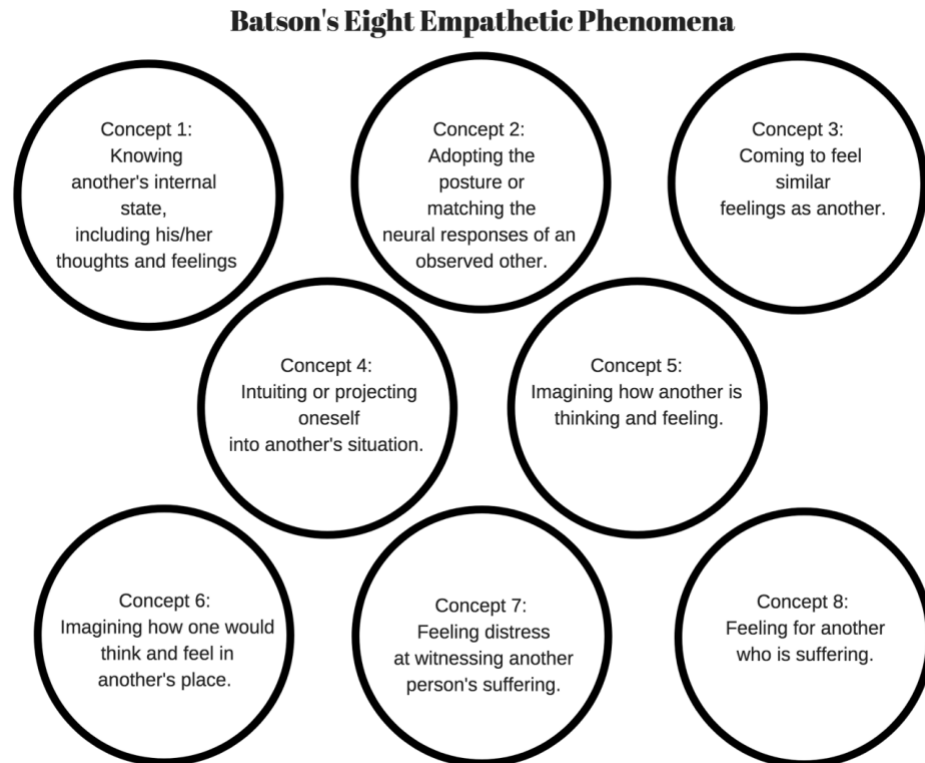


Figure 2. Batson's eight concepts described as empathetic behaviors.

Concept 4, *intuiting or projecting oneself into another's situation* and concept 6, *imagining how one would think and feel in the other's place* were modified by merging them together. This new concept is called *imaginatively projecting yourself into another's situation*. Concept 7 was omitted and concept 8, *feeling for another who is suffering* was used in this study (see Figure 3 below). These combinations were done so primarily due to the subtle differences that demarcate their definitions. By focusing on six more broadly defined empathetic phenomena, confusion in regard to explaining to participants the minute cognitive and/or behavioral differences underlying phenomena 4 & 6 and 7 & 8 could be avoided (see Figure 4 below).

Empathy Phenomena Combinations

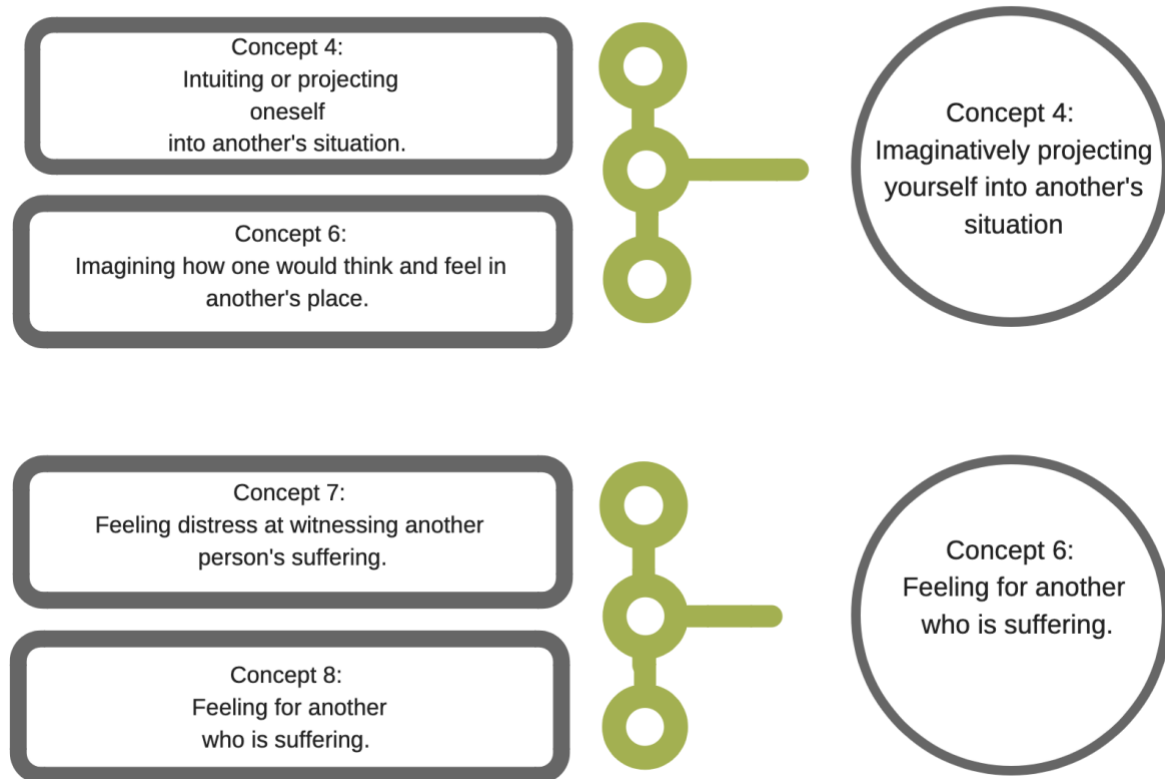


Figure 3. Batson's concepts combined.

Six Empathetic Phenomena Modified from Batson

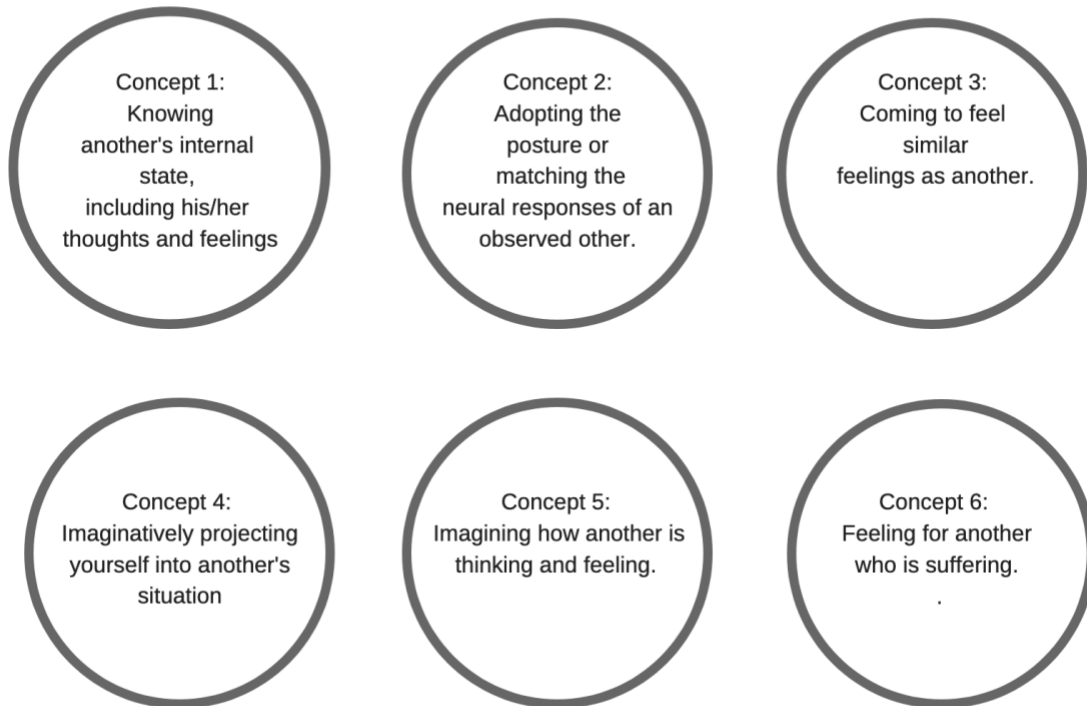


Figure 4. Six empathetic phenomena evaluated.

The motivation for this arts-based educational research endeavor was to explore facilitated art viewing discussions that follow the Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) curriculum in an effort to learn how empathetic dialogue among and between participants manifests. By engaging participants in VTS experiences and examining its ability to generate empathetic discourse, this investigation sought to explore the research question: *Which empathetic phenomena does participating in Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) exercises elicit and how?*

Introduction to VTS: A Pedagogical Method with Promise for Eliciting Empathy

Visual Thinking Strategies, commonly referred to as *VTS*, is a teaching method that uses art viewing to promote aesthetic development (Housen, 2001-2002). Abigail Housen, a cognitive psychologist, began researching aesthetic responses to artworks using 'non-directed, stream-of-consciousness interviews' as a method for collecting data (Housen, 2001-2002). As a result of her research, Housen (1999) observed that individuals process visual imagery in a progressive pattern that she classified as *stages of aesthetic development*. Viewers progress through five developmental stages of aesthetic viewing with increased exposure to artworks. As an individual's exposure to artworks increases, so too does their ability to critically

interpret and make sense of the images they are viewing (Housen, 1999). Housen's theory leans heavily on constructivist approaches, for example those of Piaget (1970), Arnheim (1969, 1974), Baldwin (1975), and particularly Vygotsky's (1962, 1978) *zone of proximal development* (DeSantis & Housen, 2000). Grounded even further through cooperative research with Philip Yenawine, a former museum educator, Housen's findings suggest that VTS methods promote critical thinking, communication, and visual literacy skills (Yenawine, 2013).

Promoted in the U.S. as a curriculum and instructional method, VTS is known in museums throughout the U.S. and is used in a variety of different educational settings (vtshome.org). It is gaining in local and international pedagogical use as well. According to the VTS website, as of 2016, 490 classroom teachers have received training and VTS consultants have traveled internationally to provide coaching support in places such as the Netherlands, Canada, Japan, Australia, and New Zealand. In 2012, the New York Times started an online VTS discussion that "bec[a]me the most popular feature on the New York Times Learning Network Blog" (<https://vtshome.org/highlighted-projects/>). VTS implementation involves having groups of students view artwork and collectively discuss *what's going on in the picture* (Hailey, Miller, & Yenawine, 2015). Aimed at helping students develop critical thinking skills through observing and discussing art, VTS discussions do not involve "finding the right answer" (Chin, 2017). As a constructivist method, group discussions facilitated by a trained teacher help in the co-construction of knowledge (Franco & Unrath, 2015). Three simple research-driven questions are designed to engage student inquiry (Figure 5):

VTS Questions:

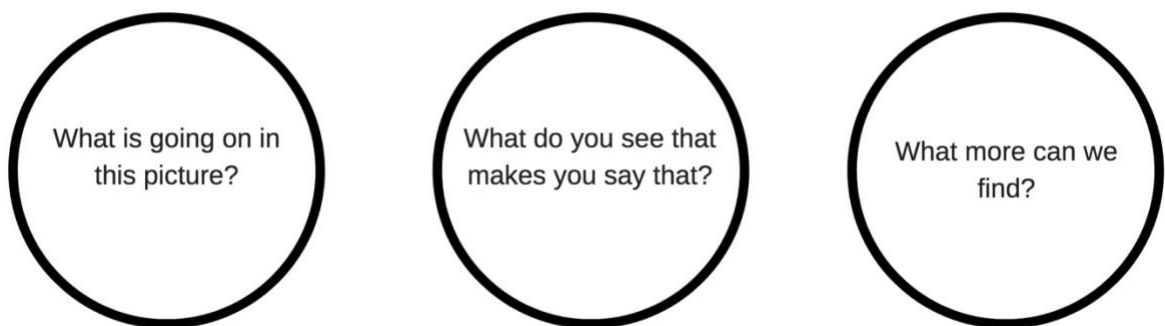


Figure 5. Visual Thinking Strategies questions.

While these questions seem simple at first glance, they have been carefully developed to achieve an active, concrete, and focused experience in art viewing (Housen & Yenawine,

2009). The facilitated group discussions revolve around a particular artwork and require students to, first, closely observe the artwork. Secondly, students articulate their perceptions and use specific points of interest identified within the artwork to reinforce their ideas. As the VTS discussion unfolds, participants' observations and discussion are cooperatively 'scaffold[ed]' upon hearing the thoughts and visual interpretations made by others (Reilly, Ring, and Duke, 2005).

In education, VTS methods have been used to teach critical thinking and inquiry and are used in a variety of different fields and across various subjects and disciplines (Yenawine, 2013). Much of the research that looks at arts engagement in relation to empathy development is located in medical educational research. Studies that I have come across that utilize VTS in examining art engagement in relation to empathy development have primarily been conducted in the area of healthcare practitioner education (Bentwich & Gilbey, 2017; Craemer, 2009, Katz & Khoshbin, 2014; Davis, Knuiman, and Rosenberg, 2016; Reilly, Ring, & Duke, 2005; Smith, 2002). Some healthcare and clinical educational researchers are exploring engagement within humanities as a means of developing compassion and empathy within students studying to be medical practitioners. More specifically, educational researchers in the medical sciences are increasingly using arts-based interventions in both promoting and assessing empathy development among students in the fields of healthcare sciences, such as medical students, social workers, and therapists (Goodwin, Deady, & Dip, 2013; Ohrt, Foster, Hutchinson, & Ieva, 2009; Reilly, Ring, & Duke, 2005; Wikström, 2000; Zazulak, Halgren, Tan, & Grierson, 2016). Observing art is thought to enhance the awareness and diagnostic skills of the health care providers (Jasani & Saks, 2013) and potentially improve patient-doctor relations by promoting empathetic and/or compassionate behaviors towards patients.

The importance of including this medical education research within the discussion here is primarily because it parallels the research investigation at the center of this article in that studies done to improve medical education have sought to explore visual arts engagement in relation to empathy development (Bentwich & Gilbey, 2017; Jasani & Saks, 2013; Reilly, Ring, & Duke, 2005; Wikström, 2000; Zazulak, Halgren, Tan, & Grierson, 2016). Medical education research on empathy development has also provided evidence supporting ideas that empathy can be promoted through curricula and fostered through educational initiatives aimed towards its development (Jansani & Saks, 2013; Zazulak, Halgren, Tan & Grierson, 2016).

Chapman, Hall, Colby & Sisler (2014) in their article "How Images Work: An analysis of Visual Intervention Used to Facilitate a Difficult Conversation and Promote Understanding," conducted a study in which photographs were used to provoke conversation amongst teachers regarding undocumented immigrants. Thirty-three middle-school teachers participated in a day of training that utilized photographic artworks by *Yo Veo* that depicted Mexican

immigrants. The photos told the story of a young girl and her family's journey as they migrated to the US. The photographs were used as a means for evoking “reflections and conversations” (Chapman et. al. 2014, p. 485). The VTS method of facilitated discussion was used while viewing *Yo Veo's* photographic exhibition. Findings for the qualitative data took the shape of interviews, focus groups, and reflection forms. Their research concluded that VTS exercises created an environment in which the participating teachers could voice their opinions, and the images served “as mechanisms motivating the viewer to be open and receptive to new information” (Chapman et. al. 2014, p. 467). Empathetic perspective-taking was reported as having been found within the interview discourse along with quotes that evidenced shifts in teachers’ attitudes and treatment towards immigrant students in their own classrooms.

Methods

Participants and Data Collection Procedures

The empirical data for this study was collected at a workshop conducted during the InSEA Regional Conference held in Vienna, Austria, in 2016. Ten adults (nine women and one male) voluntarily attended the workshop titled “Teens & Empathy: Exploring Adolescent Perspectives through Experience and Exercise.” All of the participants were actively engaged in art education as either instructors or researchers, as the workshop was hosted by InSEA, The International Society for Education through Art.

Data consists of video and audio recordings, artifacts, and a worksheet questionnaire. The workshop was held as part of a dissertation study for an arts-based education research (ABER) dissertation project. The essence of empathy was explored through a phenomenological lens, and thus empathy was intentionally brought out into the open and studied from the perspective of every participant. The collection process began with the group collaboratively participating in a VTS exercise using the same image presented at the beginning of this article—an image found in Shaun Tan’s (2006) *The Arrival* (see also Figure 6). No background information regarding the image was given to the participants beforehand—not even the title. The group was informed they should quietly examine the image for several minutes and then we would begin our VTS discussion.



Figure 6. Tan's Image used during the VTS exercise.

Following the VTS exercise was a short PowerPoint presentation of my proposed doctoral dissertation research project aimed at exploring adolescent perspectives on empathy (thus, the title of the workshop "Teens & Empathy: Exploring Adolescent Perspectives through Experience and Exercise"). The participants were essentially piloting a mini version of the art-viewing and art-making research methods being considered for the larger dissertation study. The image and art-making activities were designed in connection with the underlying theme of migration being considered as part of the study and was inspired by *The Arrival* (Tan, 2006), a graphic novel illustrating the story of a migrant's journey to a new country. The reason for choosing this particular image from the text was primarily motivated by both the image's depiction of human social relations and its narrative structure (Banks, 2007). Both the VTS exercise and the art-making activity were audio and video recorded. Finally, to wrap up the workshop, the participants answered a questionnaire that listed empathetic concepts selected from Batson's article (2009). The questionnaire asked participants to indicate whether or not they felt they had engaged in any of the empathic concepts during either the art-viewing (VTS exercise) or art-making activity.

Survey

Participants were asked to complete a questionnaire at the end of the workshop in which they were to indicate if they felt they had experienced empathetic phenomena either during the VTS art-viewing exercise, the art-making activity, or both experiences. Paper survey methods allowed participants "time to reflect on their experience of the art and focus on feelings and memories the experience elicited" (Arnold, Meggs & Greer, 2014, p.340). The answers given

on the questionnaires from eight females and one male (the participants) provided a parallel source for data analysis. A background comment by one person on the audio recording indicating that they had not taken the questionnaire seriously. As the surveys were completed anonymously, this resulted in a random selection process used to disregard one survey. The questionnaire listed Batson's empathetic concepts and ask participants to mark which ones they felt they experienced, either in the VTS exercise or during the art-making experience.

Data Analysis

Upon completion of the workshop, the 55-minute, 33-second audio recording was transcribed. The transcription was outsourced to a professional company called *Knockhundred Translations* based in the UK. The transcriptionist was provided with an .m4a audio file, an email explaining that the data was collected during an InSEA workshop, along with an attachment of the image that was used for the VTS exercise. There are several reasons for why I have chosen to outsource the transcription process. Some may argue that researchers who outsource data to be transcribed might view their data as direct evidence due to a lack of intimately connecting with the recorded discourse (Jenks, 2011). The first and primary reason that motivated my decision to outsource my transcription process was based on reflexivity. Acknowledging my own role in the discourse as both the interviewer and a researcher with a vested interest in obtaining empathetic discourse (Haynes, 2012), I wanted the initial transcription process done by an outside party with no real interest in the research outcomes. This process would provide an objective transcription of the recorded interview devoid of my own ontological influences (Haynes, 2012).

Once minor corrections to the script were completed, I simplified the document into a plain text format and uploaded it into Voyant. Voyant is a web-based environment in which you can upload various types of texts for analysis (www.voyant-tools.org). I used Voyant's *Cirrus* tool to assist in generating a visual representation of the *unique* word frequency count (Figure 7). Unique words that had a large number of hits from within the text were used in identifying emergent themes as well as in providing a beginning point for codifying the discourse. During this process, I sought to identify words most frequently used that related to specific details found within the image. The video transcript consisted of 2,570 words. Unique words that referenced specific objects observable within the image (such as suitcase, hand(s), kitchen, drawing, teapot, faces, man, and women) were used in codifying specific portions of the viewing experience to review for closer analysis in the transcribed text.



Figure 8. Close-up of suitcase from VTS image.

Female 1 Suitcase Observation:

F1: He is leaving.

INT: You say that he is leaving. What do you see that makes you say he is leaving?

F1: A number of things, like their body, their gesture, her hand over his, the suitcase, erm he looks like...

F1: The expression.

F1: Yes, it is almost like, just the whole setting, it is in the kitchen, it is a homely environment.

The female participant in the above dialogue provided her imagined perception of the suitcase as giving her the impression that *he*, the male figure in the images, is leaving. Embedded in her statement is an indication of a bodily connection she makes to the human figures in the drawing. This is exemplified in how she uses her observations of the subjects' bodies, gestures, and physical touching—"her hand *over* his"—to elicit interpretations that justify her claim that "he is leaving." Her statement implies traces of Batson's empathetic concept 2, *adopting the posture or matching the neural responses of an observed other* (Figure 2). Freedberg & Gallese's (2007) research on *embodied simulation* specifically examined art viewers' brain activity as they looked at artworks. They found that when the viewer observed areas of an image in which "a hand (was) reaching to grasp an object" (2007), the same motor response regions in the viewer's brain were active (Freedberg & Gallese, 2007; Johnson-Frey, et al., 2003; Calvo-Merinao, et al., 2006).

Observation of the touching hands provides an accessible entry point from which the viewers' empathetic inquiry is triggered from within the image. Other VTS participants began to examine the relationship of the hands as well and formulate their own statements in reference to dynamics of the touching hands in connection to the suitcase.

Female 2 Suitcase Observation:

F2: Yes, so my first impression was there was something strange in the case, something maybe precious or and they won't open it, or not sure to open it, that is why she err held his hand.

The viewer uses the visual of the touching hands as a point of departure, leading other participants into her own *imaginative projection into the [drawn figures'] situation* (Batson, 2009). In her statement, a second female participant imagines that there is something *strange* in the suitcase. Her account indicates that she is imagining that some sort of emotional communication is being relayed between the male and female figures in the drawing, rooted within their touch. Vygotsky's (1971) *Theory of Creativity* supports the notion that artists, when they aesthetically portray realistic materials, provoke an emotional response in viewers that encourages them to imaginatively bring the work of art to life (Lindqvist, 2003). VTS exercises are a form of practice that involves social art viewing, which allows group participants to scaffold their interpretations in relation to the observations made by others. Open-ended critical reading of images, as though they are a form of text (a process that promotes visual literacy), is a quality of VTS exercises that allows viewer agency to manifest (Hailey et al., 2015). Group discussions bring the viewer's emotional interpretations out into the social sphere, allowing the other participants to *know the internal state of another, including his/her thoughts and feelings* (Batson, 2009).

A third female provides an alternative reading for what emotional implications the touching hands on-top of the suitcase might imply. The way in which the message is verbalized offers opportunities for other VTS group members to share her new perspective as well as her dynamic interpretation of the internal emotional state of the figures. She even provides the group with imagined dialogue, as if the words were being spoken by the women in the image herself.

Female 3 Suitcase Observation:

F3: It could be the other way around, it could be that she is leaving, and he is trying to hold the case and she is kind of putting her hand on his to say, 'I am going'.

The following observation made by a fourth female proposes yet another imagined scenario for the couple and their relationship to the suitcase in the picture. While the word "suitcase" is not explicitly said, the idea of leaving that the suitcase has become synonymous with thus far in the discussion, is yet again re-imagined.

Female 4 Suitcase Observation:

F4: They can both be [leaving] and they are just having a last cup of tea.

INT: Okay, so maybe they are both leaving?

F4: They are leaving home, their house, and their house will be empty and this is the last cup of tea and there are tickets for a train, or I don't know.

Coming to feel similar feelings as another, Batson's (2009) empathetic concept number three, manifests during the VTS discussion in two different ways. First, in the vocalization of ideas being shared, other participants are provided opportunities to "try on" the suggested imagined narrative offered from the sharing participant. In doing so, similar emotional experiences of the new aesthetic interpretation are shared amongst participants as they are imagining it (Hoffman, 2000). Secondly, as the participants engage in actively listening to the person speaking, they are invited to share the emotional space of the speaker as they verbalize their aesthetic experience. This is arguably exemplified in the statement below.

Female 1 Suitcase Observation #2:

F1: It is interesting the contrast on the top of the suitcase itself and then his arm in the light and their hands are in the light, but her body is more in the dark, like she is slightly...I just find the visual impact interesting.

Imagining how another is thinking and feeling (Batson, 2009) was another empathetic phenomenon elicited during the VTS experience. Revisiting hits for the word *suitcase* in the transcription lead me to an observation shared by another female participant. Scaffolding her imagined ideas on top of observations made earlier by different participants, she brings to light how she imagines what the figures in the picture are thinking and feeling. As other participants listen as she describes for them her visual experiencing of the artists use of light, they empathize with her experience.

Female 5 Suitcase Observation:

F5: Perhaps the suitcase contains things, any good things that they have because I think they are definitely leaving the situation and I kind of like the idea that the suitcase can be used for a dead child because they are so poor, they can't afford a proper coffin. As I said even perhaps there could be something inside the suitcase that they might be going to sell and he is saying that we had to do this and she is going, 'no, these are my precious possessions, all my dowry,' or whatever it might be. I agree that there is definitely some tension or conflict.

Concept 6, *feeling for another who is suffering*, was reported to have been experienced by eight out of the nine participants. This type of empathetic phenomena has also been referred to as “empathetic distress” (Hoffman, 2000) or “compassion” (Smith, 1759/1853). While there are a number of conditions that contribute to its engagement—mimicry, feedback, classical conditioning (Hoffman, 2000)—it is through direct association that participants of VTS actively share in the experiences of the figures. Visual cues from the male and female subjects in the image (e.g. facial expressions, posture, and physical touching) prompt viewers to recall embodied emotions they have personally experienced and, as shared memory of these emotions manifest, viewers empathize with similar emotions being aesthetically expressed in the image (Hoffman, 2000). In evoking shared familiar emotions, the image triggers a sense of distress or sadness within the viewer.

Data Results from Questionnaires

Quite clearly, the number of positive responses indicated on the survey showed that an overwhelming majority of the participants felt that they had experienced empathetic behaviors (Figure 9). Responses to the questionnaire allowed the participants to indicate whether or not they experienced each of the specific six empathic phenomena (Figure 4) from Batson’s article (2009). Concept 5- *Imagining how another is thinking and feeling* was reported to have been experienced by everyone in the workshop. Two other empathetic phenomena that were reported as having been experienced by all but one of the participants included Concepts 4 & 6: *Imaginatively projecting yourself into another’s situation* and *Feeling for another who is suffering*.

Participants' Empathy Survey Results

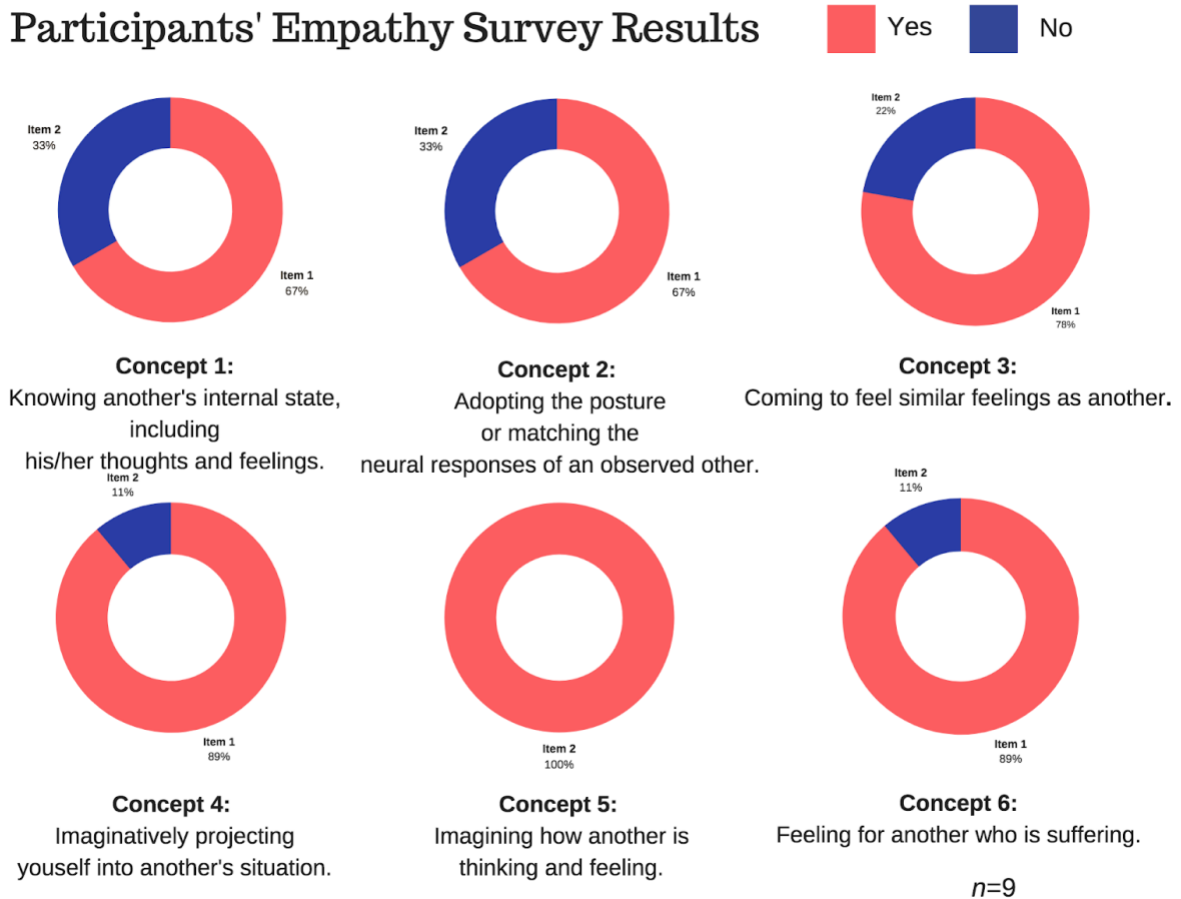


Figure 9. Results from participants' questionnaires.

Concept 1, *knowing another person's internal state, including their thoughts and feelings*, as well as concept 2, *adopting the posture of or matching the neural response of an observed other*, were both reported to have been experienced by over half of the workshop participants. *Coming to feel as another person feels*, Concept 3, was indicated as having been experienced by seven out of the nine participants.

Discussion

The survey results providing answers and insight towards the research question being explored here regarding *which empathetic phenomena are elicited and how* during VTS exercises. Participants strongly indicated that they felt empathy was experienced during the VTS exercise. One empathetic behavior overwhelmingly reported to have been experienced was *imagining how another is thinking and feeling*. However, all six empathetic behaviors were reported as having been experienced by more than half of participants. These findings are reflective of Batson's own theory aimed at addressing "*how do we know another's thoughts and feelings?* (p. 8)" Batson's (2009) theory suggests that coming to know how

another is thinking and feeling is a process that involves a *combination* of empathetic phenomena manifesting as part of the experience:

Five other phenomena have been offered as explanations. Adopting the posture or matching the neural responses of an observed other (concept 2), coming to feel as another person feels (concept 3), intuiting or projecting oneself into another's situation (concept 4), imagining how another is thinking and feeling (concept 5), and imagining how one would think and feel in the other's place (concept 6) have all been invoked to account for our knowledge of another person's thoughts and feelings. (Batson, 2009, p. 8)

Batson (2009) claims that as we try and come to *know another's thoughts and feelings*, we utilize a variety of empathetic phenomena as part of the process (p. 8-9). When engaging in VTS discussions, participants are exposed to a variety of empathetic behaviors as individuals' perspectives are initiated from different empathetic phenomena. VTS discussions unveil a variety of empathetic behaviors illustrative of how empathetic phenomena are invoked during VTS.

Empathy theory—initially described by Robert Vischer (1927/1873) as *visual perception as it affects the entirety of our minds, soul, and body as what we make into art* (Bridge, 2010) and endorsed by the notion that it is up to the viewer to make inferences based on their assessment of the visual information (Arnheim, 1974)—forwards the notion that VTS and aesthetic development have much to offer towards dialogic teaching and critical pedagogy (Shor & Freir, 1987). The results found in this study attest that VTS provides opportunities for empathy rich dialogue among and between participants. VTS curriculum is designed in such a way that it provides opportunity for participants to socially construct and negotiate meanings they assign to images (DeSantis & Housen, 2000); and, as participants share, construct, and justify meanings, they also inadvertently circulate the underlying empathetic behaviors or mechanisms they use when comprising their imagined interpretations. VTS, having been developed with the intention of being a socially constructed exercise, encourages prosocial behavior among participants (Yenawine, 1998) and utilizes perspective taking and critical thinking as a means to this end.

Studies have identified that empathy levels can vary based on a variety of factors such as age (Schieman & Gundy, 2000) or social experiences (Ben-Ami Bartal et. al., 2014). Davis' (1983) study found that higher scores on perspective-taking correlated to greater levels of social functioning (Davis, 1983). VTS curriculum holds great potential towards fostering empathy development and it can do so in a way that makes use of participatory methods that seek to engage students in critical discourse.

Milbrandt's (2002) survey of 152 in-service art educators found that many would like to address important social issues but hesitate to do so with their classes because they fear negative backlashes from parents and administrators (Milbrandt, 2002, as cited in Kraehe, Hood & Travis, 2015). Grounding socio-culturally constructed dialogical inquiry in observations specifically related to details found in an image helps to relieve tensions as varying opinions are formulated and liberatory investigations ensue (Shor & Frier, 1987). The image acts as a scapegoat or intermediary, which allows participants to distance themselves personally from implications held within their observations. Likewise, as other participants respond with different opinions, they too have to ground their argument in details in the image.

Housen (1999), utilizing a psychological lens, was able to differentiate stages of aesthetic viewing: "as each Stage, a viewer responds to a work of art in a uniquely characteristic way" (Housen, 1999, p.7). Resulting examination of the discourse from the VTS exercise in the study here also indicates that these unique viewing characteristics enrich the empathetic experiences of the viewers. Housen's (2001-2002) research discoveries revealed that repeated exposure to viewing and talking about art developed other skills not generally associated with art, such as critical thinking (Housen, 2001-2002). By creating opportunities for images to be viewed and discussed among an audience of aesthetically diversified viewers, those in lower stages of aesthetic development are able to advance to higher stages (Housen, 1983). The facilitated question-based nature of VTS exercises allows participants to problem-solve aesthetic meanings in collaboration with more capable peers. VTS participants socially construct new knowledge informed by "different points of view" as they are contributed by others (Housen, 1983).

Recognizing empathy and emotional understanding in others during art viewing may help us recognize these in ourselves. Feelings of association or being included as part of a group often affects the likelihood of behaving empathetically or prosocially towards other group members (Ben-Ami Bartal et. al., 2014; Levine et. al., 2005). Listening to peers share their emotionally imbued interpretation of an image, and then concretizing their ideas using parts of the image for justification, provides potential for reinforcing methods of moral reasoning. Watching as another person imaginatively projects themselves into situations being visually portrayed allows one to *feel into* both the verbal narratives being shared and the details of the visual text used in its construction. And—possibly—ideas shift, opinions fade, and new perspectives are welcomed.

Davis (1983) reported an interesting correlation between high fantasy scores, emotionality, and strong verbal communication in that they seem to be positively correlated with other-oriented empathy. The discourse examined here reflects a strong emotional desire among

participants to fantasize reasons as to why the two figures in the image are touching hands. VTS exercises provide practice in articulating perspectives, engaging emotionally, and imagining within a socially constructed environment, which in turn provides opportunities to simultaneously connect with others and foster empathic abilities. As stated by Sullivan (2010), “Responding to information in an insightful fashion through constructive dialogue means that private views need to enter the public discourse, for it is within an interpretive community that alternative visions are most keenly felt” (p. 203). As discussions are shaped through dialogue, underlying assumptions held by viewers become dismantled and recreated through new visual connections, symbolically reorganized by the other viewers and supported using visual reasoning (Sullivan, 2010). As multiple interpretative meanings associated with the image of the figures touching hands were revealed, the discourse analyzed throughout the study provides support for Sullivan’s aforementioned claims.

Limitations

According to Eisner (2002), “Inviting students to use their imaginations means inviting them to see things other than the way they are” (p.199). Visual Thinking Strategies holds great potential as a method for eliciting empathetic behaviors by inviting students to not only imagine what another is thinking and feeling, but to hear it be expressed verbally. Alas, as the number of participants engaged in this dissertation study comprises only a small sample consisting predominantly of art educators, further research in determining how school-age students engage these empathetic behaviors during VTS exercises is needed. Another detail to take into consideration is overrepresentation of females, as evidenced in the ratio of 8 females to 1 male. Other avenues for researchers to take into consideration in exploring future research could include examining whether a correlation exists between stages of aesthetic development and specific empathetic phenomena.

Conclusion

Visual arts education is particularly crucial in helping students understand and critically challenge what is becoming an “increasingly sophisticated” era of visual culture (Freedman, 2003). An important endeavor, teaching encompasses helping learners create meanings and understanding for themselves the world as they experience it. Imaginative behaviors play a central role in nourishing empathetic understandings for culture, people, and ideas. Imagination provides a gateway through which meanings and values become interwoven as our consciousness works to create understanding of the old and the new (Dewey, 1934/2005).

VTS exercises and engaging students in socialized art viewing experiences, as a method for fostering empathy development, affords strong potential and needs to be explored further by the research community. As Lye, Garces-Bacsal, and Wright (2017) suggest, “Art viewing is

most productive within the socio-constructivist context of group discussions, where interpersonal exchanges lead to the creation of new knowledge and provide a platform for children to consider multiple perspectives” (p. 20; see also Eisner, 2002; Yenawine, 1998). Until now, the benefits of VTS for promoting basic learning skills such as math, science, and languages has been the primary focus of VTS researchers (Chin, 2017; Curva et. al, 2005). However, this dissertation study suggests that empathy as: (a) manifested during visual encounters and (b) correlated to the ability to imaginatively see things in new and different ways (Eisner, 2002, pg. 199) be explored as two critical threads that must be interwoven into pedagogy designed for today and the future.

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