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Social Empathy: The Art of Understanding Others, by Elizabeth A. Segal

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Elizabeth A. Segal, *Social Empathy: The Art of Understanding Others*. Columbia University Press (2018). 239 pages, \$32.50 (hardcover).

This book provides an insightful overview of social empathy, a complex construct that at the heart of our communities and broader society and especially important to consider during this time of national and global political tension. Deeply rooted in centuries of philosophical exploration and more recent interdisciplinary studies, empathy encompasses both interpersonal empathy and social empathy. Interpersonal empathy combines affective engagement with cognitive recognition of the emotional state of another person, while regulating one's own response. Social empathy expands interpersonal empathy to incorporate contextual understanding and macro-level perspective taking. Segal, who has been examining social empathy for more than ten years through the lens of an academic policy expert and lifelong social justice advocate, guides the reader through this definition of social empathy to gain an understanding of the role and importance of empathy while navigating the complexities and barriers involved with empathy.

The author succeeds in transitioning this concept of social empathy out of the world of academic theory and research and into popular literature with immediate relevancy in the political and social realms. With the high degree of importance placed on empathy and the lack of empathy in our modern society, attention is well directed towards understanding and cultivating empathic responses in the world around us. Segal identifies, frames, and explains each essential component of empathy to assist the reader in understanding the significant integration of the components into the whole construct that constitutes empathy.

Segal provides a deep look at empathy in civilizations and provides the relevant historical, biological, political, and social context to follow the development of the concept of empathy. Segal distinguishes between interpersonal empathy and social empathy within a discussion of otherness and belonging, thereby contributing uniquely to our understanding of this phenomenon in the field of social work. She does not shy away from the more difficult topics and themes associated with life adversity and otherness. Segal differentiates empathy from the similar constructs of pity, compassion, personal distress, and

sympathy. The author explores the connections between empathy and altruism, cooperation, attachment, belonging, prosocial behaviors, morality, obligation, and happiness.

Segal frames the importance of empathy on the personal, community, and global levels. In this framework, she examines the impacts of stress, posttraumatic stress disorder, environment, social class, abuse and neglect, grief, substance use, and psychopathy. In addition, there is an emphasis on the importance of social empathy in building and maintaining relationships and communities. She explores having too much or too little empathy, as well as the relationship between empathy and power in politics and society. Segal engages the reader in a unique view of empathy connected to religion and technology, and the inclusion of these chapters on religion and technology underscore the author's ability to distill essential connections for the reader.

Segal builds the argument that social empathy can improve our multicultural world by connecting us to our global community and giving motivation and understanding for social action. There is an emphasis on social empathy being a journey to expand our social focus and to promote social movements. This book offers hope and a pathway toward social justice and common good. The epilogue on *Teaching Social Empathy* is the blueprint for learning and developing social empathy through the framework model involving exposure, explanation, and experience.

In this book, Segal displays her expertise in policy work, commitment to the study of empathy, and engaging storytelling. She relies on a clear writing style that speaks poignantly to modern society while challenging the reader to critically analyze the concepts and take action. Segal exemplifies social empathy in her dissection of social empathy, and the discussion of the complexities involved help the reader to understand historical contexts and develop self-other awareness. Intricate constructs are broken down into terms that can be integrated into one's life experiences.

Segal acknowledges the limiting presence and role of privilege and U.S. centrality with the hope of application to other cultures and spaces. She utilizes relevant historical and modern examples to tie in the concepts to the readers' existing knowledge and experience set. These examples model interpersonal empathy and social empathy with personal recollections that

are engaging and relatable. Through the connection of academic knowledge with current societal context, there is a strengthened focus on social justice through social empathy. The author contributes provocative and intelligent questions to elevate empathy to the forefront of public discourse, and this book is an excellent resource for everyone invested in the public good and social justice. The author brings the discussion of social empathy out of academic circles of social work, psychology, sociology, and neuroscience and transforms the discussion in popular culture and society.

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