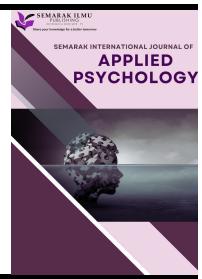




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The Fading Light of Social Empathy

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ABSTRACT

Empathy—understood as the capacity to comprehend, resonate with, and share the emotional states of others—is widely regarded as one of the fundamental instincts inherent to human nature. Indonesia has long been recognized as a society with a high degree of collective empathy, as evidenced by its consistent ranking as the most generous nation globally for seven consecutive years, and its enduring tradition of *gotong royong* (mutual cooperation) deeply embedded in communal life. Nevertheless, as the Republic marks its 80th year of independence, recent events have raised critical concerns regarding a perceived erosion of social empathy. A particularly alarming case emerged from a small village in West Java Province, located not far from the national capital. A social worker discovered a four-year-old girl in an unconscious state and immediately transported her to a hospital. Her body was found to be severely infested with parasites, and she passed away nine days later. The child had been born to parents with severe mental health disorders and lived in conditions of extreme poverty. Despite this, no member of the surrounding community assumed responsibility for her welfare, nor did any intervention arise to ensure her care or monitor her development. This tragic incident highlights a profound instance of social neglect within a context traditionally characterized by communal solidarity. Concurrently, the public has been further disquieted by a series of statements and actions by public officials perceived as devoid of empathy, which have exacerbated public discontent and triggered broader episodes of social unrest. This paper positions empathy as a foundational element of human social behaviour and seeks to study the shifting expressions and practices of social empathy in contemporary Indonesian society. The study adopts a qualitative research design, utilizing the cultural semiotics framework of the Tartu-Moscow Semiotic School to explore the phenomena of social empathy in the contemporary Indonesian context. The findings indicate a discernible transformation in societal attitudes toward empathy, shaped by a constellation of socio-cultural, political, and economic factors.

Keywords:

Empathy; humanity; cultural semiotic; social unrest; politics

1. Introduction

Empathy—defined as the capacity to understand, resonate with, and share the emotional experiences of others—is widely recognized as one of humanity's innate instincts [1,2]. It plays a

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critical role in fostering interpersonal relationships and reinforcing social cohesion [2,3]. Brooks [2] further argues that empathy serves as a foundational mechanism through which human beings construct societies based on mutual understanding and interdependence.

As the world's most generous country for seven consecutive years since 2017 [4], Indonesia may be viewed as a nation with a high degree of collective empathy. This aligns with the traditional cultural value of *gotong royong*, a communal ethic that embodies empathy through cooperation and mutual assistance. This cultural norm has been deeply embedded in the sociocultural fabric of the Indonesian archipelago since ancient times [5-7].

However, recent events have raised critical concerns regarding the erosion of empathy and social solidarity in contemporary Indonesian society. In its 80th year of independence, the nation was confronted with a tragic incident that exposed severe social neglect in a small village in West Java Province, located not far from the national capital. A social activist discovered a four-year-old girl in an unconscious state and rushed her to the hospital, where she was found to be severely malnourished and infested with parasitic worms. The child, born to parents suffering from untreated mental illness and extreme poverty, passed away nine days later [8].

Despite widespread awareness of the family's condition, both local authorities and community members failed to intervene. The lack of action toward a household consisting of a vulnerable child and two mentally ill adults—within a rural community which commonly known for its strong *gotong royong* ethos—reflects a disturbing rupture in the social fabric.

This case is not isolated. In recent years, there has been a noticeable increase in incidents that starkly contradict the values of empathy and communal cooperation. Between 2022 and 2023, at least three cases were reported in Jakarta in which entire families were found deceased and decomposed in their homes, unnoticed by neighbors [9]. Another alarming case involved the mob assault of an 89-year-old man accused of theft by a group of youths in Jakarta in 2022 [10]. More recently, the final week of August 2025 saw social unrest erupt in several regions of the country, driven by widespread public discontent over perceived empathetic failings in government rhetoric, policy, and behavior amidst ongoing socioeconomic hardship.

Grounded in the premise that empathy constitutes a fundamental human disposition, this study seeks to critically examine the manifestation of social empathy within Indonesian society. Employing a qualitative methodology and drawing on the cultural semiotic framework of the Tartu-Moscow Semiotic School, the research aims to explore the phenomena of social empathy in the contemporary Indonesian context.

2. Methodology

In broad terms, semiotics is understood as the science of signs [11-13], with the most commonly adopted frameworks in Indonesia being those of Charles Sanders Peirce, Ferdinand de Saussure, and Roland Barthes [14]. However, the branch of cultural semiotics developed by Yuri Lotman and the Tartu-Moscow Semiotic School is distinguished by its “textocentric” orientation, offering a comprehensive perspective in textual analysis [15].

For Lotman, semiotics is the study of sign systems and sign processes [16,17], with the primary semiotic object being the text as it exists within a cultural context—therefore, not as an isolated or singular entity. In this framework, phenomena may also be categorized as texts. Lotman asserts that text is not limited to literary works but encompasses representations of thought, including cultural expressions [18].

As such, Lotman's cultural semiotics—or the Tartu-Moscow model—proves especially apt for analyzing the socio-economic and political dimensions of Indonesia's pluralistic society [19]. This

model has already been employed in the study of various social phenomena, including issues related to ethnicity, religion, race, and intergroup relations (SARA) [20], natural disasters [21], and national identity discourses, particularly those concerning nation branding [22,23].

Central to Lotman's cultural semiotics is the concept of the semiosphere, a term inspired by the biosphere—the sphere of living organisms [17,18,23-27]. The semiosphere refers to a bounded semiotic universe used as a model for interpreting culture [26,28]. Just as the biosphere makes organic life possible, the semiosphere enables the existence of social life [24].

The semiosphere can be understood as a network of individual memory intricately connected with cultural memory. From early childhood, individuals absorb language and culture as inseparable components of daily life, often without questioning their underlying mechanisms [15]. Culture, in turn, generates structure and shapes the social environment in which human beings exist [24]. Furthermore, the semiosphere is described as a repository of cultural information [37], as well as both a product and a precondition for the development of culture [23,26,28].

The semiosphere, which constitutes a network of individual memory, is situated within a larger semiosphere. In human social life, the individual's semiosphere exists within the familial semiosphere. Both are encompassed by the broader societal semiosphere, ranging from the smallest social units such as neighbourhood associations (RT), to community groups (RW), nation, and beyond (Figure 1) [19].

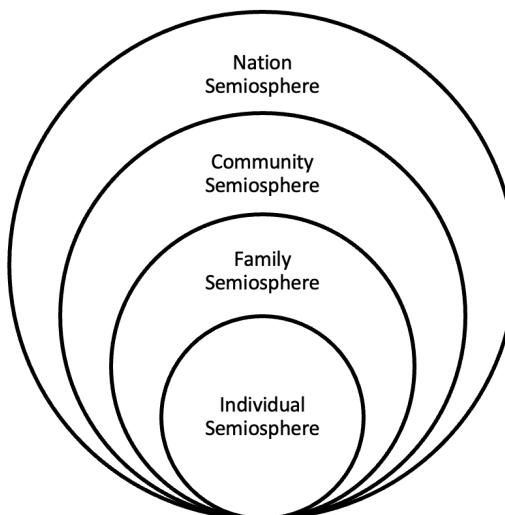


Fig. 1. Visual representation of the Semiosphere Nested within Broader Semiospheres [19]

The notion of "universe" within the semiosphere is metaphorically reflective of cultural values in geographical terms. For example, in ancient Russian literature, spatial directionality is laden with moral metaphor: the right and the east symbolize blessing, truth, and sanctity, while the left and the west are associated with suffering, sin, and immorality [26]. Similar symbolic associations are present in Indonesian culture, where the right is commonly linked with positive values and the left with the opposite. Accordingly, using the left hand to give objects to others is often deemed impolite within the Indonesian semiosphere.

Within the semiosphere, boundaries play a critical role as filters, mechanisms of translation, catalysts, controls of communication, and sources of creativity and semiotic diversity [15,17,25]. The boundaries of a text may be understood as both actual and metaphorical frames that differentiate one text from another. Lotman explains that within a cultural system, boundaries generate two distinct spaces: an inner space and an outer space. The inner space signifies "us," whereas the outer

space represents “them”—with anything outside the “us” often perceived as erroneous or inferior [15].

3. Results

As a cultural tradition, the practice of mutual cooperation (gotong royong) has been identified among various ethnic groups inhabiting the region now known as Indonesia. Examples include collaborative house-building practices in Java and communal efforts to transport stones for funerary rites in Toraja, West Timor, Flores, and Sumba. Evidence suggests that gotong royong dates back to the Neolithic period, as seen in the collective movement of menhir stones in Nias, Sumatra. Anthropologist Ralph Linton categorizes such communal modes of living as elements of culture [29]. In line with this, Lotman argues that culture embodies and transmits information—information that can be passed on and exchanged across generations and geographies. Culture, thus, not only generates structural systems but also shapes the surrounding social environment [24]. Within the context of Indonesia’s social fabric, gotong royong represents a form of lived knowledge—an informational legacy embedded in everyday life and transmitted intergenerationally and across spatial boundaries.

In the modern era, the various communities of the Indonesian archipelago coalesced into a single nation-state. The concept of “nation” is typically understood in two ways: (1) as a socio-cultural unit characterized by cultural cohesion, and (2) as a political unit (nation) unified under a single state apparatus [30]. The Indonesian nation operates within a hierarchical governance structure, wherein each administrative level is led by a representative chosen by the populace. The lowest unit is the Rukun Tetangga (RT), a micro-community comprised of several households within a defined territorial boundary. This is followed by the Rukun Warga (RW), a cluster of RTs. Above these are the Kelurahan or Desa (village units), which encompass multiple RWs, then the Kecamatan (sub-district), which oversees several villages. At a broader level, the Kabupaten (regency) or Kota (city) comprises multiple sub-districts, while the Provinsi (province) consists of several regencies and cities. The province serves as the final administrative level before the national government.

Given this hierarchical social organization, the social empathy which embodies in gotong royong are most visibly manifested at the grassroots level, particularly within RTs and RWs. Common expressions of gotong royong in everyday life include kerja bakti (communal labour for environmental maintenance) and siskamling (community-based security patrols), in which neighbourhood residents take turns conducting night watches. In many regions, communal cooperation is also mobilized for celebratory events, religious rituals, and periods of mourning. In this context, Indonesia’s recognition as the most generous nation globally for seven consecutive years since 2017 [4] is not unexpected, given the deeply ingrained culture of mutual assistance.

As Indonesian society becomes increasingly modernized, the tradition of gotong royong (mutual cooperation) has gradually diminished. This decline is largely attributable to advancements in modern technology, which have enabled individuals to carry out a greater number of activities independently, thereby reducing the need for communal assistance [6]. In urban areas—particularly within upper-middle-class neighbourhoods—community security patrols (siskamling) have been supplanted by professional security personnel, whose services are collectively funded by residents through monthly contributions. Similarly, communal clean-up activities (kerja bakti) are increasingly outsourced to professional sanitation workers, as residents in these socioeconomic strata prefer to delegate such tasks rather than participate directly.

In fact, these communal activities, aside from their functional purposes of fostering safety and cleanliness, have historically played a significant role in cultivating social cohesion and solidarity

among neighbours, particularly those in close proximity. However, as apartment living becomes more prevalent, there has been a notable shift in the roles of local administrative units (RT and RW). Their functions have become largely bureaucratic, while community life has grown increasingly individualistic. Within this context, Lotman's conceptualization of "inner and outer space" in cultural systems becomes especially salient. The "inner space," representing the collective "us," and the "outer space," signifying "them," are increasingly prominent features of individualistic societies.

This fragmentation of social bonds is also evidenced by a case in a small village in West Java Province, located not far from the national capital. A four-year-old girl, born and raised by mentally ill and impoverished parents, was discovered unconscious by a social activist. Her body was found to be infested with parasitic worms, and she died nine days later in hospital care. The apparent neglect on the part of both the village head and surrounding residents illustrates how the inner/outer space dichotomy—commonly associated with urban individualism—has begun to manifest in rural contexts as well.

Whereas, in the past, villagers would adopt new lifestyles through contact with urban migrants returning to the village, the advent of the digital era has allowed information to permeate rural communities directly, without requiring intermediaries. Advances in communication technology have rendered smartphones and internet access more affordable and widespread, facilitating constant connection with the global sphere. The proliferation of social media, in particular, has rendered social life increasingly boundaryless, altering perspectives on a wide range of issues. This shift has inevitably led to a transformation in values and lifestyles within rural communities, in line with broader patterns of social change that occur as societies seek to adapt to new circumstances and conditions.

In late August 2025, Indonesia experienced a wave of social unrest in various regions. This unrest was triggered by numerous public statements, policies, and behaviours exhibited by government officials that were widely perceived as lacking empathy toward citizens facing mounting socioeconomic pressures. In this instance, the inner/outer space dynamic operated along class lines, creating a divide between the populace and public officials—rather than between fellow citizens. These officials appeared to exist within a distinct semiosphere (inner/"us"), perceiving the public as the "other" (outer). As a result, their policies, rhetoric, and conduct appeared disconnected from, and unsympathetic to, the lived realities of the general population.

One of the principal catalysts for the unrest was the revelation that members of parliament were receiving allowances amounting to dozens of times the regional minimum wage. This was further exacerbated by footage of lawmakers engaging in dancing during a parliamentary session, along with other controversial statements and behaviours, all of which sparked significant public outrage. Although several members of parliament issued apologies and clarified that their actions and remarks were not intended to offend or belittle, the public had already lost trust and expressed deep disappointment.

Chronologically, the following events precipitated the outbreak of mass unrest [33]:

- August 15, 2025: Several members of parliament were seen dancing in the parliamentary chamber.
- August 19, 2025: Public discourse intensified following the emergence of reports concerning the substantial allowances which are dozens of times higher than the regional minimum wage, received by members of parliament.
- August 21, 2025: A member of parliament performed a parody of a disc jockey (DJ), which circulated widely and was perceived by many as inappropriate.

- August 22, 2025: Two members of parliament made controversial public statements, further fueling public anger.
- August 25, 2025: Large-scale demonstrations commenced in front of the parliamentary building.
- August 30, 2025: Looting occurred at the residences of four members of parliament whose conduct and statements were deemed lacking in empathy. Notably, three of these individuals were former entertainment celebrities.

In addition to the events that transpired during the ten days preceding the large-scale demonstration in front of the parliament building, the public has frequently been exposed—particularly through social media—to displays of the extravagant lifestyles of public officials. This phenomenon has contributed to the perception of a profound divide between the lives of ordinary citizens and those of public officials, as though they inhabit entirely separate worlds. The presence of social media has significantly influenced the social structure of Indonesian society, including its values, attitudes, and behavioural patterns across different social groups [31].

These events unfolded amid socio-economic conditions which, according to World Bank data released in June 2025, indicate that 5.4 percent of Indonesians were living in poverty in 2024. Furthermore, 19.9 percent fell below the poverty threshold typical of lower-middle-income countries, while a striking 68.3 percent were classified as poor according to the poverty line associated with upper-middle-income countries [34].

This data underscores the profound disparity between the living conditions of public officials—particularly members of parliament—and those of the general populace. Within Indonesia's semiosphere, there exists a distinctly delineated boundary separating public officials from ordinary citizens. Public officials appear to inhabit their own enclosed domain or "inner space," while perceiving the public as residing in an external or "outer space."

Such a condition is deeply ironic, given that members of parliament are elected by the people to serve as their representatives. When public officials adopt a mindset that distances themselves from the very people they are meant to represent, it is unsurprising that certain behaviours (such as dancing during parliamentary sessions), statements (e.g., a parliament member referring to the public as "stupid"), and policies (such as allowances amounting to dozens of times the regional minimum wage) emerge—demonstrating a profound lack of empathy toward the hardships experienced by the broader population.

These incidents rapidly disseminate across digital platforms, triggering public outrage that extends into real-world action. This occurs because the semiospheres of digital and physical spaces are interwoven and mutually reinforcing [35]. This dynamic aligns with Lotman's assertion regarding the transmission of information: "Because the semiotic space is transected by numerous boundaries, each message that moves across it must be many times translated and transformed, and the process of generating new information thereby snowballs" [16].

Conceptually, fostering a sense of security and social stability necessitates ensuring equal access for all citizens to fundamental rights and opportunities for personal and collective development. Such conditions are critical for strengthening social capital and cultivating bonds among individuals. Empathy constitutes a vital component in the development of healthy interpersonal relationships, the promotion of prosocial behaviour, and the construction of a peaceful society [3], [36]. In the absence of empathy among public officials responsible for policymaking and governance, social cohesion is likely to be undermined, rendering the aspiration for a harmonious society increasingly unattainable.

A series of events in the eighth decade of Indonesia underscores social changes that indicate a decline in empathy and the fading of the spirit of *gotong royong* (mutual cooperation). Reflecting on the concept of the semiosphere as a repository of cultural information [37], as well as both a product and a condition for the development of culture [23,26,28], it can be argued that Indonesia, in its later years, is undergoing significant cultural changes. However, this condition remains amendable, as research has demonstrated that empathy can be taught and cultivated [3].

4. Conclusions

The culture of *gotong royong* (mutual cooperation), as a manifestation of empathy, has existed in the region now known as Indonesia since the Neolithic period, as evidenced by the communal effort to move menhirs in Nias, Sumatra [6]. In modern times, one indicator of Indonesians' strong sense of empathy is the country's recognition as the most generous nation in the world for seven consecutive years since 2017 [4]. However, as events during the eighth decade since its independence increasingly reflect a decline in empathy, it can be said that Indonesian culture is currently undergoing significant transformation.

Empathy appears to be fading from public life, across various layers and demographics of society. One example is the case of a four-year-old girl found unconscious in a small village in West Java Province, which points to neglect by the surrounding community. Similarly, the social unrest in late August 2025 was also triggered by events that highlighted a lack of empathy among public officials.

From the perspective of Lotman's cultural semiotics, a cultural system contains an inner space signifying "us" and an outer space signifying "them" [15]. The erosion of empathy reflects a strengthening divide between the inner and outer spaces in Indonesian society—where life outside the "inner space" is no longer considered part of "us", and the "outer space" is thus seen as not our concern.

Referring to the concept of the semiosphere as a repository of cultural information [37], as well as both a product and a condition for cultural development [23,26,28], the Indonesian semiosphere was once deeply interconnected, reinforced by the strong culture of *gotong royong* (which indicated a high degree of empathy). Today, however, each semiosphere tends to stand alone, perceiving anything beyond its boundaries as foreign. Nevertheless, this situation is not without hope, as research has shown that empathy can indeed be taught and cultivated [3].

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