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Sommario/riassunto	Even though the issue of empathy is widely debated in disciplines such as ethnology and medicine, ethnologists' relationship with their informants cannot be likened to that of doctors and their patients. Likewise, the empathic dimension, considered to characterize the relationship in both cases, is not the same. In this article examples drawn from various case studies are used in a cross-cutting analysis of the nature and role of empathy in the contexts of medical and ethnological relationships. The part that empathy plays in the production of knowledge, in both types of relationship, is evaluated. What are the implications of empathy as regards the medical doctor's work and that of the ethnologist, and what is its heuristic value? In other words, what link is there between empathy and the knowledge production process? I show that even though empathy may be useful in both types of situation, ethnologists can derive a benefit from it only if, unlike doctors, they are able to control it and to distance themselves from it.