

Psychological Approaches to Deep Empathy

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Empathy is a core concept in counseling. Yet counseling skills texts, while emphasizing the importance of empathy, give relatively little guidance about just what constitutes this skill, or how to acquire it. Empathy itself is typically taken to be a basic human capacity that needs little explanation, beyond distinguishing it from sympathy. While the inference is that one can be empathic without being sympathetic, the consistent injunction to counselors is to use empathy sympathetically. Yet complicating this rather simple understanding of empathy is Rogers' (1980) description of deep empathy as "entering the private perceptual world of the other and becoming thoroughly at home in it," a claim that borders on the mystical. As Hart (2000) described this deep empathy,

understanding of the other deepens beyond what I can easily explain. I seem to experience the other's feelings directly in my own body or recognize patterns, histories, or meanings that do not appear to come from interpreting the words and gestures that we exchange. (p. 253)

This raises two basic sets of questions about empathy. First, are there two qualitatively different experiences, empathy and deep empathy, with a sharp categorical division between them, or is there a continuum of empathy experiences that in their richest expression may be called deep? The position taken in this article is that empathy skills and practice lie on a continuum. This leads to a second set of questions. What are the component skills of empathy? Are these component skills nested in some holarchy or hierarchy of complexity, such that one must practice (simple) empathy on the path to deep empathy?

Murphy and Dillon's (1998) explanation of empathy offered a good starting place to begin delving beneath the surface of empathy. Empathy is "much more than just putting oneself in the other person's shoes. Empathy requires a shift of perspective. It's not what I would experience *as me* in your shoes; empathy is what I experience *as you* in your shoes" (p. 88) (italics in original). Empathy requires (1) an internal model of

the other and (2) the capacity to experience from the perspective of this internal model of the other. The two basic dimensions of empathy are understanding and engagement. Understanding the client by itself is too passive and counselor centered, not sufficient for therapeutic counseling: empathic engagement is also essential. "Active listening" is a phrase that picks up this bidirectional activity in a powerful way. To connect this distinction with more generalized cognitive theory, these dimensions can be named encoding (understanding) and enacting (engagement).

A second insight expressed in Murphy & Dillon's (1998) explanation, so fundamental as to be almost invisible, concerns the differentiation between "I" and "You." There is not space in this short article to develop the case, but an essential prerequisite to empathy is a sense of self. Empathy as counselors promote it is not one quality of dissociation from, or fusion with, the other. Empathy always involves differentiation of self and other. This is one reason it is so important for the counselor to know him- or herself. Without such knowledge one is always prone to projecting one's own perspective onto the other, and losing the empathic mode of "experiencing as you in your shoes."

Encoding and differentiation are concepts that point to a learning process. Learning is always a process of embedding new differentiations in larger contexts, producing ever-expanding spheres of (differentiated) connectivity. Again, leaving the full explanation for a lengthier article, this leads us to the search for nested layers or levels of complexity in the development of empathy.

So then the core of our unpacking of empathy is the proposal that empathy has two major dimensions: encoding and enacting. Within each dimension there are levels of empathy, from the simplest forms of empathy to deep empathy. Each layer, or level, of empathy builds on and includes the empathic components of the less complex levels nested within it. Five levels are proposed here. The simplest levels have been postulated to exist in animals, while the most complex levels highlight the uniquely human capacity for deep empathy.

Encoding: Building an Internalized Model of the Other

Level 1: Response Correlations

To the extent to which we respond the same way to an event, that correlation supports knowledge about the other's experience. To the extent someone behaves the way we expect, we understand them (our models of the other are functional, predictive). To build a model of a particular person, we remember their behaviors.

Level 2: Associative Networks

Networks of mental connections are coherent across individuals because of the coherences in their shared environment. Empathy means living in a shared world. We not only see the same way, we see the same world. Gravity works the same for all of us. Given the brain capacity to not only perceive and respond, but also to construct complex associative networks to remember experience, we share networks of mental representations with others because we share a physical world, and the internalization of that world. To build a model of a particular person, we pay attention to the concrete particulars of their environment.

Level 3: Representational Mapping

Representational maps are category simplifications that can be explicitly encoded and more easily shared. Empathy is living in the same worldview. Two people can have the same environment, but internalize very different worlds. The naming function of language is the major activity at this level. Naming reinforces and normalizes the categorizing and associating activities of levels 1 and 2. The normalized categories encoded in language create a third level of shared experience. If two people both recognize something as a chair, they share expectations, perceptions, and behaviors related to chairs. To build a model of a particular person, pay attention to how he or she labels him- or herself, others, and events.

Level 4: Relational Encoding

At a more complex level, language is basic to the formation of culture, of internalized scripts that shape experience into gestalts of perceiving and acting that can reliably facilitate our interaction with others. At this level metaphorical understanding becomes significant. Scripts create roles and produce a normalized memory of entire patterns of shared experience. Throughout each of these levels, experiences and particular roles may be differentiated and encoded as uniquely individual, giving shape to the internal experience of self. To build a model of a particular person, uncover his or her scripts (both

conscious and unconscious). Attend to his or her metaphors. Assess his or her self-awareness.

Level 5: Meta-Coding Capacity

This level encompasses the capacity to use level 4 coding flexibly, encapsulate self as object, and localize consciousness in another's self-system. To the extent self-memory is differentiated, other-memory becomes visible, enabling the potential to encode experience differentiated from self and become more attentive to the uniqueness of the other. Deep empathy requires self-transcendence. To build a model of a particular person, consciously differentiate that person (across levels 1 – 4) from yourself. Recognize the tendency toward egocentric, culture-bound understandings of what is real and true.

Enacting: Engaging the Internalized Model of the Other in Experience

Level 1: Action—Consequences

Empathy is based on similar effects of action across individuals. Correlation among consequences grounds empathy. To engage someone empathically, imaginatively (or actually, as possible) engage in what they do.

Level 2: Joint Action

Shared event participation is at level 2. Empathy is imitation. Imitation is more complex than level 1 actions in that behaviors in level 1 are directed to a particular situation, while in level 2 behaviors are directed toward another person's behaviors in a particular situation. In counseling, mirroring body language is often useful.

Level 3: Rule-Governed Action

This level involves language, conversation, games. Empathy is joint expression of shared plans. Language enables deferred action and imitation. If you say "Tidal wave!" and we all run, we can share a common plan without having shared the original experience. Language allows more internalized action—memory replays. In counseling, mirroring language is very useful.

Level 4: Creative Coconstruction

Imaginative shared projects, mutually owned, hold a coconstructed identity. At a more complex level, enacting scripts and role-playing enable action from different perspectives. Engaging in imaginative shared projects enable a coconstructed identity, the tagging of a particular script or event with "we." To the extent we become engaged in each other's projects, we share selves.

Level 5: Service

Deikman (2000), in his article “Service as a Way of Knowing,” wrote about “knowing by being what is known” (p. 314). Fully giving oneself to the task (which may be the empathic task of being with the other), serving the task (the other), creates the possibility of experiencing the world as the task (the other). Service as a way of knowing helps underscore the actual inseparability of encoding and enacting. This level of self-giving, or self-immanence, creates a deep identification of self with other. For the purposes of this project, one moves beyond sharing selves to a sense of oneness.

Using This Framework

This brief sketch of a framework for understanding empathy has potential for assessing empathic skills, for formulating a strategy for development of greater empathic skills, and for contextualizing empathy skills within the context of other counseling skills. The framework suggests that empathy is so universally acknowledged as essential because it encompasses so many other counseling strategies, such as active listening, attending to behavior in context, interpreting metaphors, establishing a mutual working relationship, and putting self-interest aside to serve the needs of the client.

Most people have empathic experience that includes all levels of both encoding and enacting. The issue is what the default level of experience is, and how consciously can people use the skills of a particular level. Most counselors are reasonably comfortable at level 4, and the goal of counselor education is to increase consciousness of experience at this level. Level 5, deep empathy, remains as a goal for most counselors. It is not the default level nor can it typically be used with conscious control. It tends to happen to the counselor in magical moments. With respect to work with clients, most often counselors assist clients with level 3 empathic skills.

One final comment. This exploration of empathy has followed the almost universal (Western?) convention of treating empathy as an individual skill. A suggestion for further thought is to think of empathy more as a “we” activity and competence rather than exclusively as an “I” activity or skill. Deikman’s (2000) reflections on “serving the task” have explicitly pointed us in this unfamiliar direction. We can never step into someone else’s experience, only a construction of that experience, so empathy is not about the other in any absolute sense. Nor can we construct the other, particularly as clearly differentiated from self, without the actual presence of the other to ground our

imaginative work; so certainly empathy is not about “myself” in any absolute sense either. Empathy is about a mutually coconstructed reality, which creates something between us, something not wholly owned by either of us, something that has in some degree a life of its own.

References

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