

ACTIVITY 4

Empathy: The Cornerstone of Counseling

Peter S. Fernald, University of New Hampshire
L. Dodge Fernald, Harvard University

Reading a brief passage taken from an actual counseling session, the instructor plays the role of a sad and struggling client. Students are provided with 10 statements that a counselor might think or say in reaction to what the client said. The task is to identify which statements are empathic and which are not empathic. The activity provides students with the opportunity to imagine themselves in the role of counselor and to consider what they might or might not say, assuming their primary intentions were to be empathic.

Concept

This activity addresses the concept of empathy, considered by counselors to be a critical, if not the most essential, feature of any approach to counseling. In the writing component, the concept of projection is compared and contrasted with the concept of empathy. The activity is appropriate for a general counseling, advanced undergraduate, or graduate course.

Materials

Copies of the handout *Listening Empathically (Handout Master: Listening Empathically)* is included at the end this activity). The handout includes a statement by a client and 10 therapist responses (or thoughts) that students evaluate for empathic quality. Instructions to the students, which are presented in the third paragraph of the following section, may also be included in the handout.

Description

Indicate that a major aspect of any type of counseling or psychotherapy is empathic listening. Mention too that, for some approaches, the counselor's empathy is both central and critical (e.g., Kohut, 1982; Rogers, 1951, 1961). Then tell the students that the activity that they are about to engage in will help them better understand both the nature and difficulties of listening empathically.

Define empathy as the act of adopting the client's perspective or, metaphorically speaking, the act of walking in the client's psychological shoes. The counselor's task, Rogers (1951) said, is to assume, in so far as he or she is able, the internal frame of reference of the client, to perceive the world as the client sees it, to perceive the client himself as he sees himself, to lay aside all perceptions of the external frame of reference while doing so, and to communicate something of this empathic understanding to the client.

Provide each student with a copy of the handout

Listening Empathically. Allow the students 2 or 3 minutes to read the handout. Then read the following instructions, which may also be included in the handout: "As you listen to me role-play a client, pretend you are a counselor or a therapist. Your task is to adopt my—that is, the client's—perspective. Try to see the world through the client's eyes. Assuming you are able to do this, imagine which of the 10 statements listed on the bottom half of this handout might run through your mind as I speak for the client. Place a check mark by each of these statements. Remember, you are to check only those statements that indicate you adopted the client's perspective."

Next, assuming the client role, read the statement aloud with feeling so that the students have a clear sense of your sadness and struggle. After the reading, ask the students to check those statements that indicate an empathic perspective. Allow the students about 5 minutes to complete this task.

Students' interest and involvement are substantially enhanced if they are organized into small groups with instructions to arrive at a consensus for each therapist statement. However, this procedure, which is not essential, requires a greater amount of time.

Discussion

Ask the students (or a representative of each small group) what their reactions were to the counselor's first statement. Was it empathic? Does it indicate that the counselor adopted the client's perspective? Some students will take the position that the statement is empathic. Other students will disagree, and the latter students are correct. The first statement is not truly empathic, because the client, even though he obviously struggles to express himself, indicates no concerns about getting started talking. The discussion may become quite spirited, as some students may insist that the counselor's desire to

help the client indicates empathy. It is important that these students understand the distinction between wanting to be helpful and listening empathically.

Proceed to the second statement and again ask the students whether or not it is empathic. Most students indicate this statement also is not empathic, and they are correct. The client's statement may suggest indecisiveness, but the client indicates no specific concerns about indecisiveness. Also, he makes no reference to any instances of indecisiveness. The statement, therefore, represents the counselor's concern and has little or nothing to do with anything the client expresses. It reveals the counselor's agenda, possibly his or her theoretical perspective. The statement clearly is not an instance of empathic listening.

Continue the discussion by proceeding through the remaining statements.

Statements 3, 6, 7, 8, and 10 indicate empathic listening. The other five statements are not empathic. Discussion of the first few statements may be a bit lengthy. However, as the students gain a better understanding of what it means to listen empathically, discussions of subsequent items take less time.

Writing Component

Ask students to write a statement in which they define, compare, and contrast two concepts: empathy and projection. Possible answers and discussion might focus on the ways in which the two concepts both overlap and are distinct. They overlap in the sense that both involve one person attempting to understand the motives and emotions of another person. It has been suggested that projection is the basis of empathy. In so far as a therapist's emotional reaction to a particular circumstance—for example, sadness or anger over the death of a parent—is the same as the client's reaction, projection may prove a basis for empathy.

However, the concepts actually are quite distinct. According to a psychoanalytic perspective, projection occurs when one erroneously attributes his or her own unwanted thoughts, motives, or feelings to another. The more general definition of projection is a perception influenced by one's needs, wishes, and hopes.

Whether we refer to the classical or more general definition, projection differs substantially from empathy. Suppose, for example, that the therapist responding to the passage in this activity had many unhappy childhood experiences that he or she wished had never occurred. In such a case, statement 9 would be regarded as a projection or, more specifically, as countertransference.

REFERENCES

- Kohut, H. (1982). Introspection, empathy, and the semi-circle of mental health. *International Journal of Psychoanalyses*, 63, 395-407.
- Kohut, H. (1984). *How does analysis cure? (Contributions to the psychology of the self)*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Rogers, C. R. (1951). *Client-centered therapy*. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin.
- Rogers, C. R. (1961). *On becoming a person*. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin.
- Rogers, C. R. (1980). *A way of being*. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin.

SUGGESTED READING

- Fernald, P. S. (1995). Teaching students to listen empathically. *Teaching of Reading Psychology*, 22, 183-186.
- Kahn, E. (1985). Heinz Kohut and Carl Rogers. *American Psychologist*, 40, 893-904.

HANDOUT MASTER

Listening Empathically

Client: I don't feel very normal, but I want to feel that way. I thought I'd have something to talk about—then, it all goes in circles. I was trying to think what I was going to say.

Then, coming here, it doesn't work out. I tell you, it seemed that it would be much easier before I came. I tell you, I just can't make a decision. I don't know what I want. I've tried to reason this thing out logically—tried to figure out which things are important to me. I thought that there may be two things a man might do. He might get married and raise a family. But if he was just a bachelor, just making a living—that isn't very good. I find myself and my thoughts getting back to the days when I was a kid, and I'd cry very easily. The dam would break through. I was in the army 4-1/2 years. I had no problem then, no hopes, no wishes. My only thought was to get out when peace came. My problems, now that I'm out, are as ever. I tell you, they go back to a long time before I was in the army. I love children.

When I was in the Philippines—I tell you, when I was young I swore I'd never forget my unhappy childhood—so when I saw these children in the Philippines, I treated them very nicely. I used to give them ice cream cones and treat them to movies. It was just a period—I'd reverted back—and that awakened some emotions in me I thought I had long buried. (A pause. He seems very near tears.) (Rogers, 1951)

1. I wonder if I should help you get started talking.
2. Why your indecisiveness? What could be its cause?
3. It's really hard for you to get started talking.
4. What is meant by your focus on marriage and family?
5. The crying and the dam sound as though there must be a great deal of repression.
6. Decision making just seems impossible to you.
7. You want marriage, but it doesn't seem to you to be much of a possibility.
8. You feel yourself brimming over with feelings reminiscent of your childhood.
9. At some point, you will probably need to dig into those early unhappy experiences.
10. Being very nice to children has somehow had meaning for you.

REFERENCES

Rogers, C. R. (1951). *Client-centered therapy*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.