



# THE SIGNIFICANCE OF EMPATHY IN PSYCHOLOGICAL COUNSELING (A REVIEW OF LITERATURE)

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## Author Note

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## ABSTRACT

*Empathy is the ability to take another person's role and thus become aware of his feelings as well as his motives, his attitudes, values and beliefs. It depends on our ability to make accurate interpretations of the information other's give about their internal states. Empathy is the most important skill and is significant in psychological counseling. Counseling efficiency is closely related to the empathetic attitude of the counselor. The accurate empathetic understanding of the clients experience and feelings make the counselling process more effective and gives a positive outcome. The barriers and blocks to communicate effectively can be removed with empathetic listening and showing compassion to support the people.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Empathy, Cognitive, vulnerability, Compassion, Perceptual Skill, Therapeutic, Misconceptions, Psychological, Inter perceptual, Interpersonal disruption, Trauma, Validated, Self motivation, Self actualization.*

## INTRODUCTION

Empathy is the capacity to understand or feel what another person is experiencing from within their 'frame of reference' that means it is the capacity to place oneself in another's position. It IS the social, cognitive and emotional processes. It is the ability to take another person's role and thus become aware of his feelings as well as his motives, his attitudes, values and beliefs. It is also considered as an ability to assess accurately the other's definition of the situation. Empathy is sometimes used synonymously with the term 'sympathy'. it is different from sympathy. While empathy is on ability the requires sensitive awareness, sympathy is a behavioral tendency that not only involves awareness but also implies a willingness to take on another's mood, especially when the other individual is fearful, anxious or depressed. Empathy is more easily defined and measured as a kind of inter-perceptual skill.

Empathy depends on our ability to make accurate interpretations of the information other's give about their internal states. Certain universal ways of expression, which communicate empathy, have been identified as laughter, sadness, terrified, etc. but it is also subject to culture variations. One situation that is emotionally appropriate in one culture may not be of significant importance in another culture. According to some psychologists, by late childhood and culturally determined and learned emotions, by sheer number, outweigh the unlearned ones. Comparative studies with individuals from European American and East Asians individuals show that in western cultural context, the self is typically experienced as an independent entity, defined primarily by its internal attributes such as preferences, desires and traits, (*Kitayama Duffy & Uchida, 2007) Markus & Kitayama1991*. In contrast, in Eastern cultural contexts the self is typically experienced as an

interdependent and interpersonally connected entity (*Kitayama, et al., 2007: Markus & Kitayama,1991*) primarily defined by one's place in social relationships and others surrounding the self. This culturally varying degree of overlap between the self and others is expected to shape individuals' responsiveness to and level of accuracy in reading others' pain.

*Buchheimer* identifies five dimensions of Empathy. They are as follows:

- Tone – the expressive and non-verbal dimension conveying harmony and unity,
- Peace - the appropriate timing of leads
- Flexibility – the ability to adapt to situation.
- Perception of frame of reference
- Repertoire of leads – methods of approach.

Based on these:

Empathy has been identified as a core condition for providing counseling. It is the counselor's skill or capacity to gain trust and openness on the part of counselee.

“Counseling is an interactive process conjoining the counselee who needs assistance and the counselor who is trained and educated to give this assistance” (*Pere, 1965) Patterson (1959)* characterizes it as is the process involving interpersonal relationships between a therapist and one or more clients by which the former employees psychological methods based on systematic knowledge of the human personality in attempting to improve the mental health of the latter.

*Rogers (1952)* describes counseling as the process by which the structure of the self is relaxed in the safety of the client's relationship with the therapist, and previously denied



experiences are perceived and then integrated into an altered self.

Practically all the definitions concur with the view that counseling is a process that involves bringing about sequential changes over a period of time leading to a set goal. Counseling is the counselor – counselee relationship that is not casual, matter – of – fact and business like but it is characterized by warmth, responsiveness and understanding counseling is concerned with bringing about a voluntary change in the client. It is a means to help people realize their potential. At times counseling or rather, say psychological counseling is regarded as a helping technique. Many people opt to become a counselor without any professional training and start to counsel people with mental illness. They start giving advice and unnecessary guidance to the afflicted person without learning the exact role of counseling. There are quite a few misconceptions about counseling. It would perhaps be useful to state what counseling is not, to help clarify our conception of it.

#### Counseling is not

- Giving advice or solutions
- It is not being judgmental
- Not sitting in silence and thinking
- Sorting out the problems of client
- It is not cheerleading
- Looking at client's problems from your own perspectives

Counseling is *“a talking therapy that involves a trained therapist listening to you and keeping you finds ways to deal with emotional issues”* (UK NHS). It is a helping approach. The client fails to utilize his capacities fully and efficiently. The role of counselor is to help the client gain fuller self-understanding through self- exploration and to appreciate strengths and work on weaknesses. Prevention of emotional tensions, anxieties, indecisions are such problems that come under the range of counseling. It is commonly believed that counselor resolves the client's problems immediately but as already explained that counseling is bringing change in perception, understanding, goals and values by a clients own conscious efforts and the counselors help them by using self-direction, self-motivation and self-actualization techniques. It will be seen that there may be differences between the expectations of the clients and the goals of the counselors. These difference causes dissatisfaction, misunderstanding and irritation. Counseling has no magical solutions. It is concerned with individuals find realistic and workable solutions to their problems by helping them gain an insight into themselves and for this kind of professional relationship a counselors, skills play very important role. Rapport, empathy and attentiveness are the three most important skills that can either facilitate or inhabit the counseling process. Rapport means interest, responsiveness and sensitive emotional involvement. Through rapport, the counselor understands and communicates with the client from the commencement to the end of the interview. Attentiveness is the presence of mind. It is focused attention of the counselor on the client's behavior, non-verbal cues, listening skills, etc. Empathy is the most important skill and is

significant in psychological counseling. It is the ability to feel and describe the thoughts and feelings of others.

Lack of Empathy in counseling makes the counseling process ineffective thus, devaluing, the trust of client. The person who is suffering emotional conflicts or traumas need to talk with someone who understands the situational factors and his/her symptomatic problems. Counseling efficiency is closely related to the empathetic attitude of the counselor. It is a therapeutic relationship in which the counselor treats the client as a unique human being with his/her own experiences and worldviews coordinated with the counselors' experiences and worldviews. “You must experience empathy before you can express it,” writes counseling experts *Jeff and Nancy Cochran (Cochran & Cochran, 2015, p.48)*. Expressing empathy within a counseling session involves more than just words; the counselor must communicate a deep understanding and display a personal connection with the client. American Psychology Association confirmed that empathy is a *“sensitive understanding of the patient's feelings and struggles; seeing them from the patients point of view.”* (APA, 2019) Emotional intelligence is vital in psychological wellbeing and growth and helps in developing emotional skills and empathy. In the absence of empathy, nobody can counsel the other and provide a positive, remedial outcome. Empathy is expressed through body language, listening, sharing perceptions and using declarative statements. It is a sequence starting with client's expression of emotion, followed by the perception, vicarious experiences and empathic response by the counselor.

#### Example

##### Case Excerpts

Client: “I am feeling very low and irritated.”

Counselor: “Yes, and you seem to be unhappy.”

Client: A moment of silence (let the client be silent and take in his/her own thoughts.

Counselor: “I understand” (take a pause)

Client: [He understands me] “I want to share my experience...” [Pause] “Tell me if I am wrong.”

Counselor: “Definitely, please go ahead. I am here to help you.”

Most often, the client will need considerable encouragement to express his/her interpersonal disruption or trauma. It there is lack of empathy than the counter productivity of counseling will be not show positive results. However, the positive quality of empathy can also at times get in the way of healthy counseling relationship. Because of empathy some client's regard this quality of counselor as an intrusion. The client might regard this empathic understanding as a penetration into protected areas of self. The client wants to be understood by not completely known. The counselor is an important figure for the client and there is constant fear of rejection or abandonment on the part of client. He thinks that the counselor might reject him if he expresses his vulnerable side.

##### Case Excerpts:

##### (Case of an addict after many sessions)

Counselor: “I see, you are looking happy today.”



**Client:** “Yes, I am...” [Pause] “I am feeling better but at times I still find it difficult to cope.” [Stops suddenly]

**Counselor:** “You want to know why this is happening to you.”

**Client:** “No, No, it’s just that I am trying” but [Pause] I am not sentimental types...” “I have been thinking a lot about my life and how I used to be...” [Long pause] “It’s very hard for me to remember...”

At this point in the conversation, the client is not very interested in opening up to the counselor because he thinks that his vulnerability might ruin his image and relationship with the counselor. The counselor is empathetic but the client might regard this as breaching the trust of someone who understands him. Empathy has both negative and positive impact on the effectiveness of counseling. However, the lack of empathy is still a hindrance in the therapeutic relationship of counseling. The client’s emotional pain must be allowed and accepted, as only then the effectiveness of counseling will be validated.

## CONCLUSION

In this article, I discussed why empathy is important in the counseling encounter. Empathy is seen to involve the client feeling understood and accepted. It is the process of placing oneself into another person’s shoes. In counseling empathy involves the experiencing of emotional reactions. *Roger (1957)* defined empathy as – “To sense the client’s private world as if it were your own, but without ever losing the ‘as if quality’.”

However, the question is that whether empathy is a positive trait or a negative trait in psychological counseling? In counseling, empathy is an expression of the regard and respect the counselor holds for the client. As a therapeutic tool, it connects the counselor and client. The empathetic counseling approach brings a positive impact. The lack of empathy means lack of connecting to the clients as human beings and considering them just as objects. Empathy is a significant skill used in psychological counseling. It is a social skill that helps builds a therapeutic relationship. The professional counselors must be supported through continuous educational programs to build and polish their empathetic skills as it allows them to effectively communicate with their clients.

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