

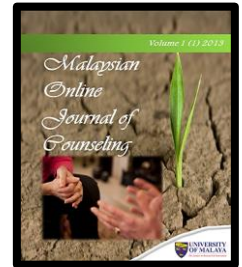
## COUNSELOR'S EMPATHY: THE PRE-REQUISITE FOR EFFECTIVE COUNSELING

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### ABSTRACT

Empathy is essential for quality care of clients. The ability of a counselor to be empathic in a counseling session influences the effectiveness of the counseling session. Carl Rogers listed empathy as one of the core condition of effective counseling (1957). Empathy was said to improve the therapeutic effectiveness of the counseling relationship by providing the condition of acceptance and understanding between the counselor and the client. This article will explore various aspects of empathy, including its definition, its relationship with emotional intelligence, its contribution to the counseling relationship, the level and stages involved and ways of enhancing counselor's empathic ability. Overall, this article intends to increase the level of understanding of counselors towards this abstract concept of 'empathy'.

*Keywords:* Empathy , counseling , emotional competence



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## INTRODUCTION

Clients entering a counseling relationship are usually accompanied with the hope that the counselor will understand the turmoil and struggle they are experiencing deep within themselves. Self-disclosing to someone they barely knew is not an easy task and clients will usually be very cautious about doing so. Counselor who acts as the agent of change in a counseling relationship has to be able to explore the client's problem effectively without any constraints and resistance from the client. So what makes a counselor effective? The answer lies in simple term, 'empathy', also known as the ability to understand and experience the feeling of another person and communicate it effectively to him/her.

Empathy opens up doors of opportunities for the counselors and the clients to explore overt and covert messages regarding a situation and share it on a deeper basis. With the existence of empathic understanding, clients will feel at ease to share their problems, knowing that the counselors genuinely understand what they are going through. Even resistant clients can be effectively dealt with if the counselors use their empathic skill to its greatest potential. According to Gelso and Fretz (2001), virtually all major schools of counseling recognized the importance of empathy in the counseling session. Therefore this article explores various aspects of empathy and how it contributes to the effectiveness of a counseling session. It will also propose some steps of training novice counselors to become more empathic in their sessions with the clients.

## EMPATHY DEFINED

According to Stein & Book (2001), at its core, empathy is the ability to see the world from another person's perspective, the capacity to tune in into what someone else might be thinking and feeling about a situation – regardless of how that view might differ from our own perception. Rogers (1980) described empathy as follows:

“It means entering the private perceptual world of the other and becoming thoroughly at home in it. It involves being sensitive, moment by moment, to the changing felt meanings which flow in this other person, to the fear or rage or tenderness or confusion or whatever that he or she is experiencing. It means temporarily living in the others life, moving about in it delicately without making judgments”. (p.142)

Duan and Hill (1996) categorized two types of empathy. The first type is called cognitive empathy or intellectual empathy. It involves the counselor “taking in” the client’s perspectives and comprehending how the client feels. The second type is called effective empathy which entails the counselor sharing emotional identification with the client and actually feeling at least some of what the client feels. Empathy consists of two components, namely empathic understanding and empathic responding. According to Sutton and Stewart (2002) empathic understanding is a subjective experience on the part of the counselor. It means having the ability to perceive the clients’ world as clients see it, to grasp it from their frame of reference and being able to communicate that understanding tentatively and sensitively back to the clients. Meanwhile, a good empathic response is not merely based on the verbal and non-verbal communication of the counselor. A good empathic response must take into account the context of what is said, and everything that surrounds and permeates a client’s statement (Egan, 1994). Empathy can be interpreted as ‘listening with the heart’ followed by the act of conveying the understood meaning to the client.

## **EMPATHY AND EMOTIONAL COMPETENCE**

The notion of competency has always been the topic of discussion among the counseling professionals. Competency in counseling extends beyond skills, knowledge and expertise. Competency of counselors also includes the ability of counselors to think and act as needed by the situation in the counseling session. This competency refers to both cognitive and emotional intelligence of the counselors. Much has been discussed about cognitive intelligence or IQ. However, the notion of emotional intelligence became famous only in the 1990’s by authors such as Mayer and Salovey (1993, 1997) and Goleman (1995, 1998). Since then, empathy has been given much emphasis as an important element of emotional competency in conducting individual relationships.

Goleman (1998) listed empathy as one of the prerequisite of being emotionally intelligence. Goleman also described empathy as our social radar which navigates our interpersonal behavior with others. With regards to empathy, Goleman offers the following description:

“Sensing what others feel without their saying so captures the essence of empathy. Others rarely tell us in words what they feel. Instead, they tell us in their tone of voice, facial expression, or other non-verbal ways. The ability to sense this subtle communication builds on more basic

competencies, particularly self-awareness and self-control. Without the ability to sense our own feelings or to keep them from swamping us, we will be hopelessly out of touch with the mood of others.” (Pg.135)

According to Goleman (1998) the prerequisite of empathy is self-awareness, recognizing the visceral signals of feelings in one own body ; among counselors, the most effective and empathic were best able to tune in to their body’s own signals for emotion. Goleman (1998) identifies three levels of empathy as follows:

- a)First level empathy requires being able to read another’s emotion,
- b)Second level of empathy entails sensing and responding to a person’s spoken concern or feelings (type of empathy required for counselors),
- c)Third or highest level empathy is understanding the issues and concerns that lies behind another’s feeling (also known as advance empathy which is usually an additional competency of experienced counselors)

Meanwhile, Egan (1998) distinguishes between two levels of empathy in counseling; primary level and advanced level accurate empathy. Primary level empathy refers to the interchangeability between the clients’ statement and the counselor’s responses. Advanced level empathy is built on the primary level base and emphasizes the counselor’s responding in a way that facilitates deeper exploration of relevant issues. According to Covey (1989), empathic communication is one of the seven habits of highly effective people that provides psychological air which helps people breathe more freely in their relationships. Therefore, the ability to empathize is important among counselors in order to ensure the effectiveness of the counseling session. At the same time, it becomes the indicator of how emotionally intelligent the counselor is. Without empathy, the counseling session which is built upon trust and understanding will not be entirely successful.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF EMPATHY IN THE COUNSELING RELATIONSHIP

It is impossible to think of therapeutic counseling without linking it to empathy. Over the years, the ability to empathize was considered as one of the necessary characteristics of counselors. The effectiveness of the counseling process hinges on empathy and the ability to focus on our own feelings and share them (Goleman, 1998). According to Goleman (1998):

“Beyond mere survival, empathy is critical for superior performance wherever the job focus in on people, Whenever a an artful reading of a person’s feeling matters, from sales and organizational consulting to psychotherapy and medicine, as well as leadership of any kind, empathy is crucial to excellence”. (pg 139)

One of Rogers’s necessary and sufficient conditions for constructive change in counseling requires the counselor to “experience an empathic understanding of the client’s internal frame of reference and endeavors to communicate the experience to the client” (Rogers, 1957). In terms of the counseling relationship, Rogers (1957), viewed empathy as:

“To sense the client’s private world as if it were your own, but without ever losing the ‘as if’ quality – this is empathy, and this seems essential to therapy. To sense the client’s anger, fear or confusion as if it were your own, yet without your own anger, fear or confusion getting bound up in it, is the condition we are trying to describe. When the clients world is clear to the therapist and he moves about in it freely than he can communicate his understanding of what is clearly known to the client and can also voice meaning in the client’s experience of which the client is scarcely aware”. (pg98)

According to Gelso & Fretz (2001) it is hard to envision effective counseling if the counselor is not able to empathize with the client and his or her issues. Empathy is the principal route to understanding helpless clients and allowing them to feel understood (Brammer & MacDonald, 2003). Helpers make an active effort to put themselves in this internal perceptual frame without losing their own identity or objectivity. (Brammer & MacDonald, 2003)

Empathic responding is one of the crucial conditions in effecting clients change during the counseling session. Brammer, Shostrom and Abrego (1989) defined empathy as the attempt to think with, rather than for or about the client. Empathy helps to build rapport an elicit information from clients by showing understanding, demonstrating civility (Egan, 1994), conveying that both counselor and client are working from the same side and fostering client goals related to self-exploration (Gladstein, 1983). The counselor can be considered successful if the client benefits from

the empathic understanding and lead to their own self understanding and consequent confidence in their ability to solve their own problems (Brammer & MacDonald, 2003).

According to Egan (1994), as helpers, counselors must be able to enter clients world deeply enough to understand their struggles with problems situations or their search for opportunities with enough depth to make counselors participation in problem management and opportunity development valid and substantial. Okun (1992) was very passionate about empathy, as stated in his writing as following:

“The therapeutic relationship becomes the single most curative variable in treatment. It provides the necessary context in which repressed parts of the ego or self-repressed unbearably painful feelings can surface, become understood and integrated with the help of the therapist’s (support)”.  
(pg 21)

## **STAGES AND PROCESS OF EMPATHY**

Gladstein (1983) points out that several conceptualizations of empathy seem to include some common stages. First empathy is experienced emotionally, through a process of identification with the client. However this is not complete identification. Rather it is a process in which the counselor, to some extent experiences what the client feels and yet maintains the necessary separateness. Second, there is cognitive activity, in which the counselor consciously shifts around the client expressions and considers their meaning to the client. Third, there is a communication of that empathy to the client. Lastly, there exist the client’s sense and perception of the degree to which the therapist is attuned and actually with him/her in immediate personal understanding (Barrett-Lennard, 1986). And this process will recycle throughout the counseling session.

Hackney (1978) recommends that “the counselor needs to experience the feelings first, comprehend it as best as you can, then react to it”. According to Sutton and Stewart (2002) demonstrating empathy means:

- a) being able to step into the client shoes and being able to step out again
- b) being able to back stand far enough to remain objective rather than standing too close and risk becoming enmeshed in the client’s world
- c) being close yet remaining separate from – it doesn’t mean we become the other person

The following diagram demonstrates the process of empathy. The interchange of messages happens when the client begins to self-disclose to the counselor. The counselor, by listening attentively to the various aspects of the message being conveyed, will try to understand it thoroughly. Simultaneously the counselor enters the frame of reference of the client, putting himself 'inside the shoe of the client'. Once the counselor truly understands, the counselor will virtually exit from the client's frame reference. Following this, the counselor will deliver his understanding of the self-disclosure verbally to the client. The techniques and skills used to deliver this understanding might differ among counselors. However, most importantly, the client must experience the sense of being understood. This process will continue throughout the counseling session and it requires the counselor to be alert and sensitive to the reaction of the client towards the counselor's empathic responds.

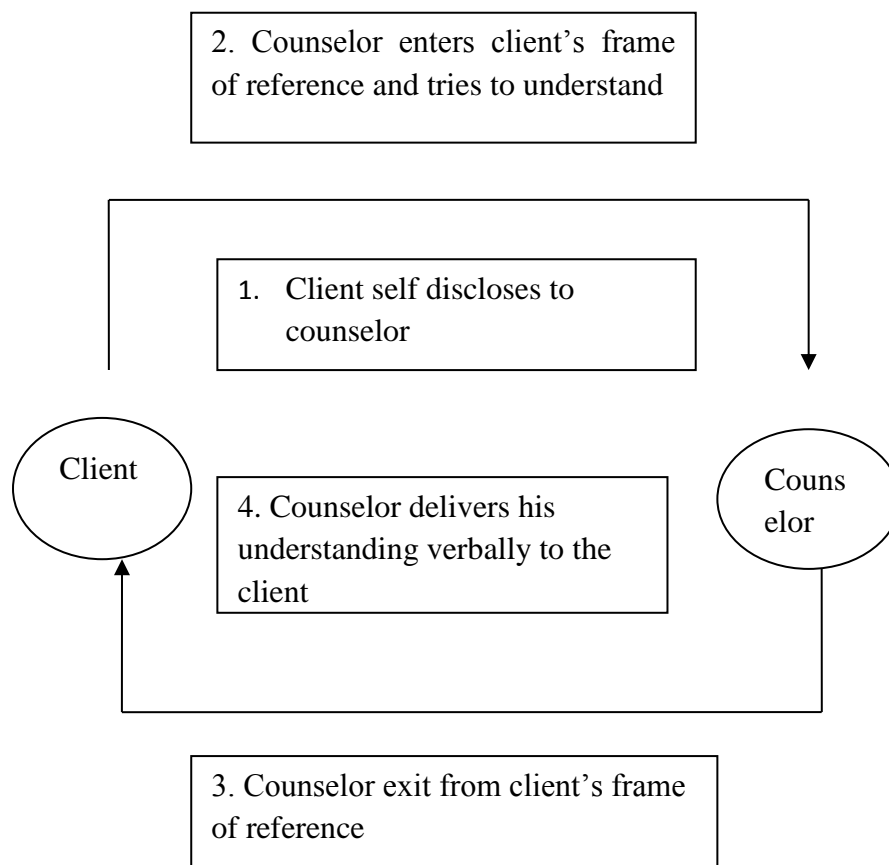


Diagram 1: The process of empathy

A skilled counselor is able to enter the client's frame of reference and exit from it entirely, once the session ends. The failure to retreat from the client's frame of reference usually results from counter transference. Keen (2007) emphasized that empathy means to recognize others' feelings, the causes of these feelings, and to be able to participate in the emotional experience of an individual without becoming part of it. The inability to get out of a client's frame of reference is similar to what Goleman (1998) termed as emotional distress, a situation where one person catches another person's upset. Goleman described this phenomenon as when someone who is highly empathic is exposed to another person's negative moods and doesn't have the self-regulation skills to calm his own sympathetic distress. This will hinder the therapeutic process since the counselor has the tendency of either overtaking client's responsibility of solving the problem or losing the focus towards the client and began to focus on his own self. The skill of empathizing needs intuition and good imagination. At the same time, the counselor must be able to separate himself from the client's problem in order to remain calm and stress free.

In order to avoid emotional distress, a good counselor must master the art of emotional management to avoid being overwhelmed by the distress of clients. Too much empathy on the counselor's part could be a problem since it perpetuates a dependent maturity (Brammer & MacDonald, 2003). Over identification with the client will lead to sympathy which is more of an emotional reaction, immediate and uncontrolled, which inundates when one person imagines himself in the position someone else is (Ioannidou & Konstantikaki, 2008). Sympathy can lead to suspension of care and lack of objectivity of the counselor in attending the client. Novice or inexperienced counselors may confuse empathy with sympathy. In reality, there exist clear distinction between sympathy and empathy. Sympathy puts the counselor first, by putting into words our reaction to and feelings about another person's situation (Stein & Book, 2001). Sympathy also refers to the situation where the counselor feels pity for the client and often acts from a one-up power position rather than as an equal (Hill and O'Brien, 1999). On the other hand, empathy puts the counselor second, by listening actively to the client's self-disclosure, understanding and reflecting the feelings of the client regarding his or her situation.

According to Goleman (1998) understanding someone's point of view or perspective and knowing why they feel as they do, does not inevitably mean embracing it. Empathy is not about being 'nice' or accepting and agreeing to everything that the clients expressed in the session. But it is rather a non-judgmental attitude of the counselor who believes that a client has the right to his own perspectives. By expressing empathy, a person (counselor) admits the existence of another's



(client) viewpoint without passing any judgment on its validity (Stein & Book, 2001). Empathy therefore involves a deep understanding of the clients' feelings and the ability to verbalize it in a way that will make the client feel understood.

## **TRAINING NOVICE COUNSELORS TO BE EMPATHIC**

As a counselor educator at a higher learning institution, the author finds that counselor education training mostly focuses on teaching the novice counselors to respond empathically to clients rather than teaching them to feel empathy towards the client. Obviously from the earlier discussion in this paper, there is a glaring difference within empathic understanding and empathic responding. Novice counselor may easily learn the techniques of responding empathically by using the skill of reflection during the conversation with the client. However, the main objective is to get into the client's frame of reference and understands the true emotions experienced by the client before the counselor can comprehend it back in terms of reflection. Empathy is hard work for those who are not very intuitive (Ida Hartina Ahmed Tharbe, 2005) because empathy works within the conditional framework of 'as if I were that other person'. Therefore it taps into the listener's intuition and imagination (Sutton and Stewart, 2002). Goleman (1998) said that intuition and gut feeling bespeak the capacity to send messages from our internal store of emotional memory that is our own reservoir of wisdom and judgment. This implies that some people are more empathic than others by nature. Empathic people are more sensitive towards social signals indicating what other people may want or need (Leiberg & Anders, 2006).

Researchers found a significant relationship between the level of counselor emotional intelligence and counselor ability to express empathy towards the clients (Miville, Carlozzi, Gushue, Schara, & Ueda, 2006). However, counselors should not be discouraged if they find themselves lack of this so called 'natural skill' because empathy is a skill that can be mastered through learning. As part of emotional intelligence ability, increasing stress was placed on the idea that empathy is observable, measurable and readily trainable – that is often requiring only few hours of training (Carkhuff, 1969; Cherniss & Caplan 2001). The only difference is some individuals might have to work harder at mastering this skill while others (with more intuition) find it quite easy to be mastered. What Rogers and many other seen as "a way of being" was reduced and narrowed to a trainable skill (Gelso & Fretz, 2001). Following this, the author recommends several practical ways of enhancing the empathic ability of novice counselors during their course of training.

The ability of being empathic comes from accurate observation and understanding of client's verbal expression and body language during the counseling session. Research on body language by Sweeney, Cottle & Kobayashi (1980) reveals that nonverbal channels convey more than half the emotional message. Counselors need to be fully aware of the facial expressions and bodily reaction displayed by the clients in order to be more empathic. Therefore, a good counselor training program must include enhancing the competencies to identify facial expressions and read body languages. This will improve counselors' ability to identify the emotions of the clients accurately thus enabling them to enter clients frame of reference with ease. At the same time the counselors also become aware of their own facial and bodily reaction towards emotional triggers that may exist during sessions with the clients. This ability helps counselors to avoid any possibility of counter-transference due to over involvement in the clients' feelings. Additionally, the ability to understand the manifestation of emotion through facial expression and body language will increase the counselors' sensitivity towards false or manipulative expression (Mayer and Salovey, 1997). This helps the counselors to be more aware of negative intentions of the clients (if any) and navigate their counseling session more effectively.

Secondly, a good counselor training program must also help the novice counselors to build their vocabulary of emotions. The counselors must be able to identify various types of emotions and differentiate different range of emotions, both negative and positive, in order to comprehend what has been heard more accurately. According to Buckley and Saarni (2006), the ability to understand others' emotions are shape by the range and complexity of an individual's emotional vocabulary, which in turn facilitates or constricts how an individual conceptualize another's emotional experience. The more words a person uses to describe emotions in his everyday life, the more emotionally aware he is being. Goleman (1995) listed 8 primary emotions and variations which are: anger; sadness; fear; disgust; shame, enjoyment; love and surprise. Each category of these primary emotions consists of emotions which are representing relatively the same meaning but with different intensity. Counselors with limited range of emotional vocabulary may experience difficulty to identify the intensity of different moods and emotions, for example the difference between anger and rage, or between stress and depression. Although the counselors may still technically use reflection as a way to show empathy towards the clients, they will not be able to touch the clients on a deeper level.

Novice counselors should be train to be more empathic by keeping a self-reflection journal during their course of study. They should be encouraged to reflect on any emotional experience during

their practical training in relations to their own problems or the problems brought up by their clients in the sessions. They should also be able to discuss these emotional reflections with their supervisors to increase their understanding towards the experience. In a way, it will also help the counseling trainees to manage their emotions more effectively through discussion and appropriate self-disclosure on top of the reflection journal exercise. A study by Pennebaker (1997) on the effect of writing about emotional experiences shows that when individuals write or talk about personally upsetting experiences in the laboratory, consistent and significant health improvements are found.

A sense of empathy is more difficult to achieve, although not impossible, particularly in helping situations in which client and counselor are far apart in race, culture, age, experience and socioeconomic status (Brammer, Abrego and Shostrom, 1993). Therefore it is common for counselors dealing with multicultural clients to experience more challenges in trying to understand the struggles of their clients. In a multicultural country like Malaysia, an effective counselor training program must include the involvement and active interaction of counselor trainees with clients from different ethnicity and cultural backgrounds. The involvement can take the form of formal counseling session or informal sharing session from time to time. The recruitment of counselor trainees from various cultural backgrounds for each batch intake will also enable these future counselors to learn and share from each other. These steps will bridge the gap of understanding towards different lifestyles and ways of thinking and increase the competency of counselors to be more empathic towards clients from various backgrounds. Constantine (2001) proposes that the degree to which counselors can appropriately empathize with the concerns of culturally diverse clients may ultimately determine their ability to respond to these clients in a culturally sensitive manner.

## **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, an effective counselor is able to empathize with the client by listening to every detail that is being said, understanding it accurately and responding to the client in a way that reflects the understanding. Empathy is not necessarily a natural talent. It can be learned through trainings and direct experiences of dealing with various types of clients. Emotionally competent counselors usually convey empathy better than those who are not emotionally competent. Therefore it is necessary for counselor educators and counselor training programs to incorporate ways of enhancing emotional competency and the ability to empathize among novice counselors.

Regardless of how it is mastered by the counselors, it remains as an important pre-requisite of an effective counseling session.

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