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‘The Tool of Our Trade’: Defining and Teaching Empathy in College Programs

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The Tool of Our Trade': Defining and Teaching Empathy in College Programs

Abstract

Empathy is a fundamental skill in developing trusting, respectful relationships, which is a required capacity for many college program graduates upon entering the Canadian workforce. However, little is known about how faculty define, value, and teach students to develop and effectively utilize empathy. A grounded methodological approach shaped the gathering of curriculum and interview data to assess relevant faculty understandings and teaching approaches. Faculty generally shared an understanding of empathy as 'putting yourself in another person's shoes', while also valuing attention to emotions and a perspective-taking orientation. All faculty saw empathy as central to their students' future success in the field, and to the well-being of Canadian society as a whole. A variety of teaching approaches were noted, with an emphasis on experiential methods. Faculty members expressed universal interest in further collaboration with peers.

L'empathie est une compétence fondamentale qui permet de développer des relations de confiance et de respect, ce qui constitue une capacité requise pour de nombreux diplômés de programmes collégiaux lorsque ceux-ci font leur entrée sur le marché du travail canadien. Toutefois, on sait peu de choses sur la manière dont les professeurs et les professeures définissent, valorisent et enseignent à leurs étudiants et à leurs étudiantes comment développer et utiliser efficacement l'empathie. Une approche méthodologique fondée sur le terrain a façonné la collecte de données sur les programmes scolaires et les entretiens afin d'évaluer les compréhensions et les approches pédagogiques pertinentes des professeurs et des professeures. En général, les professeurs et les professeures s'accordent pour dire que l'empathie est « le fait de se mettre à la place d'une autre personne », tout en accordant de la valeur au fait de prendre en considération les émotions et l'orientation vers la prise de recul. Tous les professeurs et toutes les professeures considèrent l'empathie comme un élément central de la réussite future de leurs étudiants et de leurs étudiantes dans leur domaine, et du bien-être de la société canadienne dans son ensemble. Toute une variété d'approches d'enseignement ont été notées, avec une concentration sur les méthodes expérientielles. Les professeurs et les professeures ont exprimé un intérêt universel de collaborer plus avant avec leurs pairs.

Keywords

empathy, therapeutic relationships, teaching and learning, community college programs, faculty collaboration; empathie, relations thérapeutiques, enseignement et apprentissage, programmes de collèges communautaires, collaboration entre professeurs

Orientation

My experience as a therapist for many years, and another decade as a college professor working with students in Human Services programs, have led to the belief that empathy is at the heart of beneficial therapeutic relationships. Since thousands of college graduates enter the Ontario workforce each year in jobs for which the ability to build interpersonal relationships is central (Ministry of Colleges and Universities, 2020), the work of teaching college students to effectively employ empathy seems important. However, although I had many talks with one like-minded colleague, I did not know much about what other curriculum writers and faculty at my college thought. This combination of factors prompted my curiosity to investigate further. An initial literature review process failed to find reference to the teaching and learning of empathy in colleges, though there is a significant amount of research on this topic in university-based professional training programs (e.g., counselling psychology, social work, medicine, nursing, business, design). Identifying this gap led me to start with a grounded methodological approach in studying faculty understanding of empathy, its importance, and how we teach it in college programs, starting with my home college. As Strauss and Corbin (1994) point out, researchers typically use grounded methodology because they have interest in the development of theory in the area they are studying, though they must be watchful as pre-conceived theories and biases can negatively affect the research process. Briefly sharing my background and experience of starting this research project here reflects my attempt to be transparent about how highly I value empathy, and how opaque my understanding of colleagues' perspectives on it were.

Defining Empathy

Since the definition of empathy has been contested territory in philosophy and psychology for over a century, misunderstanding is a significant risk (Joliffe & Farrington, 2006; Ries et al., 2012; Stueber, 2019; Yager, 2015). Misunderstandings by faculty regarding what empathy is and how best to teach it could have significant consequences for students, and by extension, society. Batson (2011) and Coplan (2011) offer useful lists of empathy definitions in scholarly texts, though it is beyond the scope of this paper to go into detail regarding these competing definitions. Coplan's (2011) description of empathy will be utilized as a working definition in this paper as it aligns with most mainstream research study definitions (Batt-Rawden et al., 2013; Dexter, 2012; Gerdes et al., 2011; Levett-Jones et al., 2019), while also being specific about crucial features of the concept.

Coplan (2011) defines empathy as one's conscious understanding of the experience of another person, including emotions, while simultaneously being clear that it is the other person's experience being perceived. There are three key aspects of this definition: 1) the perception of the other's experience is derived through observation, as it is not possible to directly apprehend the experience of the other. Therefore, empathy is an imaginative process; 2) understanding others' experiences includes cognitive and affective components, as these are indivisible when discussing experience; and 3) there is a clear 'other-orientation' to the imagined experience (i.e., it is not the same as imagining what it would be like for oneself to be in the situation). It is crucial to distinguish empathy from sympathy, concepts which are often confused for one another. According to Stueber (2019), in terms of the philosophical tradition (from which Coplan's (2011) definition is derived), sympathy is the term originally used to mean what we now think of as empathy, perhaps at least partially explaining why these concepts and their meanings are so often confused with each other. Currently, sympathy is considered the emotional response one feels when becoming aware of the

distress of the other, which aligns with the general psychological understanding of sympathy as ‘feeling sorry’ for the other (Egan, 2018; Shebib, 2017). In clinical settings, sympathy is not seen as therapeutically productive, but instead leads clients to feel patronized and can create a disempowering therapeutic milieu. In general, the difference can be understood as sympathy being an emotional response to the distress of others, while the empathy is focused on understanding the experience (including emotions) of others. Though Coplan’s (2011) definition is thorough regarding the perspective-taking aspect of empathy, there is a specific addition to the definition required when discussing it as a therapeutic skill.

In terms of the clinical use of empathy, there is broad recognition of at least two features: that the beneficial, clinical use of empathy includes a) perception of the felt experience of the person one is working with, and b) a response that demonstrates the understanding one has of the other’s felt experience (Dekeyser et al. 2011; Egan, 2018; Shebib, 2017). Where the first part matches Coplan’s (2011) definition, though in a less detailed manner, the second part is specifically aimed at showing and collaboratively developing understanding of the client’s experience. Rogers (1957, 1967), likely the most important contributor to understanding the value of empathy in therapeutic work, wrestled between definitions that focused more on the actual mechanism of response versus whether or not the client felt that the therapist understood them, eventually settling on emphasizing the importance of consistently, verbally checking with clients to ensure empathic understanding occurs (Bozarth, 2011). For the remainder of this paper, the term ‘empathy’ should be understood as including the detail of Coplan’s definition, as well as this verbal response aspect of the clinical definition. The term ‘perspective-taking’ will be used if talking about empathy without a verbal response.

Where discussing definitions could be considered an attempt to answer the ‘what’ question, the following section could be considered exploring literature related the ‘why’. In other words, why is it valuable to teach students to learn to empathize?

The Value of Empathy

It is commonly accepted that empathy is a crucial tool in clinical settings (Dekeyser et al., 2011; Elliot et al., 2018; Gerdes & Segal, 2009; Riess et al., 2012; Watkins et al., 2014). Researchers in the health sciences, business, and social work have also found that the effective use of empathy results in overall improvement in outcomes, including that improved understanding of the perspective and experience of others allows practitioners to better tailor their approach to the specific needs of particular patients or clients (Bas-Sarmiento et al., 2017; Dean et al., 2017; Decety et al., 2014). Further, empathy has long been seen as a necessary step in design-based learning and production models, where understanding the perspective and needs of students, clients, and communities is crucial (Alrubail, 2015; Jamal et al., 2021; Razzouk & Shute, 2012). In terms of counselling, specifically, though clients may begin a therapeutic relationship hoping that the practitioner will fix them, an empathic approach demonstrates the belief that the client’s perspective is important, and that understanding their own perspective is a vital part of the healing process (Egan, 2018; Shebib, 2017). Rogers (1957) describes the growing development of understanding through empathy as an empowering process, in which clients discover their own healing through the process of ever-expanding understanding of themselves. Hill and Lent (2016) find that this type of empowering relationship has primary importance in any positive outcome for clients.

It is important to note potential negatives regarding the use of empathy for practitioners, especially 'empathic distress' or 'empathy fatigue' (Grant, 2014; Preusche & Lamm, 2016). Empathic distress is the negative emotional experience of the practitioner that can occur when empathizing with a very difficult emotional experience, where empathy fatigue may occur as the result of empathizing with difficult experiential states over a longer period of time (Preusche & Lamm, 2016). An emerging body research has demonstrated that mindfulness practice can have a protective function against distress and fatigue for professionals who employ empathy (Birnie et al., 2010; Dean et al., 2017). Though not the focus of this paper, these potential negative results of using empathy as a professional tool can be serious and significant, and so deserve mention.

Finally, a brief discussion of the value of empathy to society at large is warranted, as college graduates in the field impact the people and communities they work with, and by extension, society as a greater whole. Rifkin (2009) demonstrates that though violence has dominated history books and our present media landscape, humans are naturally wired as pro-social organisms, and that empathy is a crucial aspect of pro-social behaviour. From this perspective, empathy has played a central role in creating a society of basic peace and prosperity, in providing a capacity to put aside one's own perspective in the service of working to understand the sometimes very different experiences, thoughts, and feelings of others. Bregman (2020) points to a similar gap in human historical records, suggesting that though we have instincts towards aggression and violence, human nature is more skewed towards prosocial behavior. Bregman (2020), though, expresses concern that in-group empathizing can lead to increases in negative reactions toward members of outgroups. Bloom (2017) also sees what he defined as empathy in a negative light, focusing on its emotional component, and championing the value of what he called 'rational sympathy' as a more appropriate response to the distress of others. These criticisms use definitions of empathy that do not match either Coplan's (2011) theory, or the clinical behaviour of verbally demonstrating understanding. Instead, Bregman and Bloom appear to conflate the perception of emotion in others with unconscious, negative reactions. Such interpretations of the meaning of empathy underscore the need for thoughtful and careful definition of the concept in education.

In starting this study, it was unclear what definition (or definitions) of empathy may exist in program curricula, and how faculty themselves understand the value of empathy, in the college context. Gaining clarity about what currently exists in these areas could address gaps in understanding, and therefore could be helpful in the efficacious development and modification of curriculum, and in educating faculty about the meaning of empathy. Following from this, how faculty understand and value empathy would seem crucial in shaping their approaches to teaching empathy, which is the focus of the following section.

Teaching and Learning

There has been a significant amount of research over the past two decades examining how to help students improve their ability to effectively use empathy with clients and patients (Batt-Rawden et al., 2013; Dexter, 2012; Gerdes et al., 2011; Hill & Lent, 2006; Levett-Jones et al., 2019; Teding van Berkhout & Malouff, 2016). Researchers are fairly unanimous in finding that, overall, teaching and learning approaches have a significant impact on how well students are able to utilize empathy as a therapeutic, relationship-building tool, suggesting that it is a teachable skill. In a meta-analysis of research regarding the clinical use of empathy, Teding van Berkhout and Malouff (2016) find that having learners focus on understanding the emotional state of the client, as well as reflecting back this understanding, led to an improved clinical efficacy. Hill and Lent's

(2006) meta-analysis shows that a combination of modeling (by professors), practice/feedback, and instruction regarding the use of empathy outperforms any one or two of the teaching approaches alone. Modelling outperformed both practice/feedback and instruction alone, the latter having the poorest outcome in terms of learners being able to use empathy effectively when it was the only teaching technique. Hill and Lent (2006) point out that caution is needed when evaluating teaching approaches, as modelling and instruction often overlap.

The caution noted above should extend to interpretation of such research in general, as measurement of the complex process of any teaching approach is challenging. For example, how one professor models the use of empathy may be very different than another, and yet both styles are allotted to the same category for research purposes. A related issue is that there are many creative techniques utilized by faculty to teach empathy that are not widespread enough in use or are not well known enough for larger, quantitative studies (Bell, 2018; Lawrence et al., 2015). For example, Bell (2018) suggests several activities that could be helpful in developing the perspective-taking aspect of empathy such as: working in a soup kitchen, interviewing someone with different cultural experience, ability, gender etc. While quantitative measurement regarding teaching approaches can provide general overviews of effectiveness, thorough qualitative analysis offers a richer understanding about the different ways that empathy can be taught effectively.

Summary

Though a significant body of research exists regarding university program training, in order to shed light on how we understand empathy and teach students to utilize this vital skill at the college level, an analysis of curriculum, faculty understanding of empathy, and faculty teaching approaches is required. Such an inquiry may lead to improvements in college curriculum and teaching related to empathy, and may also contribute to the body of literature regarding training for effective use of empathy as a clinical tool, and as a valuable skill in society as a whole.

Methodology

A grounded methodological approach is particularly useful in situations where an obvious theoretical framework is not available (Buckley, 2017). Though there is a growing framework regarding the understanding, teaching, and learning of empathy in other areas as noted earlier, it is unclear whether and how this is related to what exists in colleges. Further, Corbin and Strauss (2014) stress the importance of the rigorous collection of meaningful data, without oversimplification, when studying complex phenomena involving human interaction. The examination of how empathy is understood, valued, and taught by college faculty is clearly such a complex undertaking. As per Buckley (2017), I started with the collection of the data which was most available and descriptive as a first step, namely course outlines.¹ As Strauss and Corbin (1994) point out, a vital aspect of the grounded approach is ongoing, constant comparative analysis. The initial and secondary reviews of course outlines, first few interviews, and review of

¹ Course outlines, including specific learning outcomes for each course (5-8 per course) are developed from program learning outcomes. Program learning outcomes are based on provincial standards where they exist, but for programs that are unique, outcomes are developed by local faculty. Curriculum is reviewed and renewed every five years, often involving consultation with community partners, current students and graduates, and faculty and administrators involved in delivering the program.

the transcripts of these conversations, reflected such an iterative process, with each step supporting and leading to subsequent steps and thinking. This comparative analysis continued through data analysis and writing, when initial coding led to concepts, and then to categorization, and finally to a tentative theoretical framework (Buckley, 2017). Throughout this process I attempted to utilize reflexivity to examine how my own biases and immersion in the world of teaching empathy at a college might be affecting my research approach and understanding of findings (Charmaz, 2006). Approval for the study was granted by the college's Research Ethics Board.

Finally, though grounded theory offered a methodological approach for collecting data and moving towards a tentative theoretical framework, further research and analysis is needed in order to refine the framework and increase levels of trustworthiness in findings (Buckley, 2017).

Course Outline Content Analysis Process

Course outline data analysis will not be directly reported on in this paper, though it requires a brief description here as it was a step in the methodological process, but not the focus. I began by emailing coordinators, faculty, and administrators of programs that seemed to potentially have some inclusion of empathy in their curricula, to ask for recommend courses in their programs for review. In total, individuals involved in twelve programs responded, recommending 98 course outlines. I began by simply reviewing each outline, including course descriptions, learning objectives, and course content areas, looking for some form of the word empathy, but very quickly realized that it appeared very rarely, and so expanded my search to highlight course materials that referred to the following areas: 1) form of the word empathy (including empathic, empathetic etc.), 2) the learning of interpersonal skills, and 3) understanding others' perspectives. Using these data, a set of interview questions were generated.

Interview Participants

There were sixteen (16) participants: twelve (12) female and four (4) male, with an estimated age range of 35-65. All were college professors, with one (1) from Community Safety, two (2) from Business and Management, two (2) from Liberal Studies/Communications, three (3) from Health, Wellness, and Sciences, and eight (8) from Human Services programs. Those initially contacted for the curriculum review part of the project identified potential interview participants. Others self-identified as interested in participating after hearing about the study. In total, participants reported an average of 7.93 years full-time teaching and 9.44 years of part-time teaching experience. In total, participants brought six (6) PhDs and ten (10) Master's level degrees to the study. Participant initials have been changed and program affiliation was not included in reporting data to protect confidentiality.

Interviews

Interviews were conducted over a three-month period, and were 35-65 minutes in length. A semi-structured interview approach was utilized, meaning that there was an orienting set of questions, with follow-up, clarifying, and extending questions being added as deemed appropriate (Sheperis et al., 2017). Interviews were recorded and transcribed, and the process of iterative thematic analysis continued. Transcriptions were printed out and scanned to get an initial sense of key themes, and then were more thoroughly reviewed, utilizing line-by-line coding (Strauss &

Corbin, 1998). Finally, connections between themes were examined in constructing an initial theoretical framework.

Data Analysis

Four main overarching themes emerged: the definition of empathy as ‘putting yourself in another person’s shoes’; that empathy is crucial to student success in the field post-graduation; a variety of teachings approaches are utilized to teach empathy, with an emphasis on hands-on approaches; and faculty believed a community of practice regarding the teaching and learning of empathy would be beneficial. What follows is a deeper analysis of these themes, including descriptions of associated subthemes.

Defining Empathy

Empathy as the ability to ‘put yourself in another person’s shoes’ was, by far, the most common answer from faculty when asked to define empathy. Of the 16 faculty members interviewed, 11 used this metaphor to define empathy. One participant referred to a song from their youth that included the idea of walking a mile in someone else’s shoes before judging them. Another stated that they literally have their students take off their shoes in class and try on other students’ shoes, when defining the concept of empathy. In addition, though not directly using the metaphor, the other five interviewees also included trying to understand the perspective and/or experience of others to define empathy.

A related sub-theme was that the majority of participants (10/16) specified that understanding the emotional components of experience is a crucial aspect of perspective-taking. Professors working in social service-related programs were more likely to emphasize the importance of understanding the emotions of clients, saying that if students do not do this, their understanding of the clients is incomplete. Seven participants also emphasized the importance of recognizing the difference between the client’s feeling and one’s own. Participant N.O. said:

I talk a lot about being able to take the perspective of another trying to understand their emotion without taking on that emotion and without it crushing over into the realm of sympathy and feeling sorry for and being able to do all of that without judgement which is hard and then being able to recognize the emotion in another person or the feeling that the person is experiencing or may have experienced.

Similarly, participants in social service fields uniformly emphasized the importance of reflection as a vital aspect of empathy, as described by S.T.:

So if they're telling me a really tough situation ... I'll sort of infer how they might be feeling. You know, "with all this stuff going on, I imagine this must feel overwhelming for you, I wonder, does it or whatever." And when you can articulate it and put it into words, you get ‘ah’ [excited]. You almost feel the bond in the therapeutic room strengthen a little bit. For me this is a weird side tangent but whenever I really truly understood the client I get goosebumps.

Emphasis on perspective-taking was a particularly common aspect of defining empathy for professors teaching diversity courses. The nuance here is that empathy is not just understanding the experience of the other (though this is included) but that it also includes an awareness that others have different perspectives because they have lived different lives. Participant P.R. expressed this in saying:

... it's critically important for ... students because they encounter people who have different life circumstances, different views, different religions, and they have to be able to transcend judgment. And part of that is understanding that not everyone shares our worldview.

Additionally, these participants said they encourage students to value the overall benefits that a diversity of perspectives can bring.

Eight participants emphasized the need for self-awareness in students to even get to the point of being able to empathize, saying that students must be able to put aside biases, values, and beliefs in order to begin the process of understanding the experience of others. Participants that spoke of this subtheme agreed that without the ability to put aside one's own perspective, it is impossible to even recognize that others have different perspectives on the same events. As U.W. said:

If you have bias and judgment because of a person's situation, I don't think you can enter into a relationship and demonstrate empathy. So I think understanding and being self-aware and having self-knowledge about yourself and your social location, about how that's going to impact the relationship is another important part in being able to engage in a relationship where you're demonstrating empathy.

In this sense, participants suggested that the biases which impede empathy must be dealt with first.

Empathy in Graduates

The main benefits of empathy discussed by participants were: being better able to tailor services to client needs, which helps practitioners avoid causing harm due to unconscious biases; being able to more fully address issues due to including a diversity of perspectives; and building trusting relationships. The centrality of empathy in working with people in the field was expressed by participant F.H., who said, "Empathy is the tool of our trade," expressing the sentiment echoed by many other participants who emphasized its undergirding role.

Participants were unanimous in saying that the perspective-taking aspect of empathy is vital to accurately serving client needs. Six participants noted the distinction between an empathetic and 'expert-driven' approach to working with clients. As B.D. said, "When we teach people how to get outside of themselves and really be present for others, they're going to be able to be more effective in working with their clients because they're less likely to project or use any of those unhealthy ways of how to work with people." According to these research participants, then, skilled practitioners start with the understanding that the client is the expert, and therefore they must listen carefully and respectfully to the client's experiences.

Five participants spoke about the value of a diversity of experiences and perspectives. As V.B. said:

I would argue you can never have too much time spent in empathy, because that's one of the skills that's going to serve you best in your future careers, life, family. That ability to one, check your ego at the door. That I don't know everything. I'll never know everything. And two, I can learn something from everybody, no matter what background they may be, that they have value, that they have stories you should listen to, stories that you should consider even if you may not agree. But it'll give you a much broader picture of humanity on this planet.

Three participants spoke about how valuing the strength and resilience of diversity in general has a positive impact on society as a whole, beyond the direct impact of practitioners using empathy with individual clients of communities. The suggestion was that the modeling of empathy by practitioners encourages a diversity of perspectives to be shared, and the further development of an empathetic mindset in clients and communities.

Finally, seven of the participants who teach in human service programs suggested that empathy is a necessary component in building trusting, therapeutic relationships with clients. This trusting relationship is vital for counselling in that it tends to lead to more and deeper sharing of important information and feelings by clients, and also tends to lead to increased uptake of beneficial activities discussed as potential components of solutions between counsellor and client. C.E. summarized this in saying:

I find it makes [clients] trust a whole lot more and they'll tell me things or disclose more things to me about this has been done, but I'm actually feeling this or I'm not being heard over here. And it's that sometimes I don't even work on their issues or solve challenges or work on goals with them. It's just letting them be heard. ... So it opens up a lot of more doors for trust.

Teaching Empathy

Participants emphasized the importance of utilizing several different approaches to teaching empathy, and of focusing on experiential, hands-on learning components. F.H. described teaching empathy from many angles in saying:

... whether we're teaching about empathy or reflection that it needs to be multi-tiered. ... first lecture about the concept and then role play in front of my class using a student and other student where I might be the person doing the empathetic response and listening and then ask the students what parts of that discussion conveyed that I was listening and understanding and sharing that back? ... then get them to practice that skill with each other. With me watching and giving feedback around how to do it and then actually having them practice and test with me.

Participants often described using lectures to initially introduce students to definitions and features of empathy, with details being dependent on the kinds of classes they teach. For instance,

those teaching the use of empathy as a clinical skill typically reported using lecture to define the concept, describe where empathy fits with other counselling skills, and discuss how it can be effective (e.g., building trust and developing understanding with clients). Those teaching diversity-based or other courses reported discussing empathy less directly at first, often starting with process meant to stimulate thought about the perspectives of others. In both cases, however, participants said that overall lecturing was a minor component of lessons.

Participants teaching clinical classes all discussed the use of demonstration of empathy as a counselling skill. There were two main demonstration techniques described, which participants said they used one or both of: a) demonstrating the use of empathy themselves at the front of the class with a volunteer 'client', and/or 2) using video demonstrations of practitioners using the skill of empathy. Two participants reported using television and movie clips of characters being empathetic as demonstration tools for their classes.

When teaching empathy as a clinical skill, participants all reported having students practice the use of empathy with classmates. Feedback processes include having classmates as observers who give verbal and/or written feedback to the practicing student after they have completed the exercise, and/or feedback from professors who observe practicing students and give verbal feedback when practice sessions are completed.

A distinction was between professors who have students in the client role use real-life issues (6), and those who have student-clients use simulated issues (2). In terms of using real-life issues, participants uniformly said that they set rules that issues cannot be too severe (e.g., trauma-related experiences) and that protocols are put in place regarding confidentiality and what to do if the student-client gets overly distressed. The rationale offered by faculty having students use real-life issues as 'clients' was expressed by P.T.: "[In role-playing, you are] dependent on students ... being a good actor and being able to think on their feet and come up their responses which many students are not prepared to do." Role-playing, according to these participants, allows students to practice working with the content presented by their peer playing a scripted part, but does not allow for the practice of reflecting genuine feeling. Participants who use simulated issues said that they are not comfortable having students use real issues due to concerns about confidentiality and that student-clients may become too distressed.

Nine participants said that they use case studies to give students an opportunity to develop and practice empathy. Participants typically introduce a case, and have students either alone or in small groups consider and discuss what 'clients' might be feeling, thinking, and experiencing. Several participants suggested that this is a very useful way to 'introduce' students to clients that they may struggle to work with due to issues that may trigger students (e.g. abusive clients, different ethnicity, sex, gender, sexual orientation etc.).

One final aspect of teaching empathy arose in dialogue with five of the participants of this study. These participants spoke about how being empathic with their students is a crucial aspect of teaching empathy. J.L. said that:

I think if you can be an approachable person and you can empathize with students and their personal issues and what their struggles are, they respond more to you as a person. ... And if they have a better relationship with the teacher, they are more likely to do well in the class.

Teaching empathy, according to these participants, is empty if professors themselves are not empathic with students. This is more than just modeling the use of empathy, though it functions

in this way as well. Instead, these participants said that being empathic towards students has the same effects as empathy used by practitioners, namely: a) building trust with students, b) helping students to improve in their understanding of themselves through the understanding shown by professors, and c) making professor responses attuned to where students actually are and what their needs are. These professors indicated that they also see modelling effects with their students. G.I. said that being empathetic as a professor is "...[just] the way that you interact. And for kids, people, whoever, that's an observational learning." In other words, modeling is seen as a crucial part of a suite of tools used to attempt to teach their students the use of empathy. A related subtheme emerged from two participants who suggested that communication in general at the college could be improved if administrators, faculty, and staff had more empathy in communications. K.J. said:

So we work in an ecosystem and it's a one thing for faculty to learn empathy and practice it in the classroom. How might we get really curious about how empathy is lived as a core value beyond the classroom? In other parts of our system? And then what can we do as a as a community to inspire different practices, to help people check themselves and grow their own empathy and encourage others?

Though not a central theme in terms of number of participants, empathy as a teaching and communication practice is a finding that deserves further attention, and will be referred to again in the discussion section when making recommendations.

In summary, participants reported that several hands-on approaches to the teaching and learning of empathy are central, including: a) short lectures, b) demonstration, c) student practice with feedback from multiple sources. An unexpected response was several participants reporting on the importance of professors modelling empathy with students.

Communication about Empathy

The fourth overarching theme was about communication regarding empathy at the college. No professors could state clearly whether or how empathy was discussed in their guiding course outlines, though many had a vague sense of how much empathy or related concepts were included. Three participants said they do discuss the teaching and learning of empathy with other faculty members, though most others described a fairly solitary experience in this regard. All interviewees stated that they would welcome the opportunity to discuss the teaching and learning of empathy more, though a few were hesitant, as is discussed below.

Six participants suggested that though they believed empathy did not appear in their course outlines at all, they saw it as infused in their curriculum, and as a central, informing concept for the teaching of everything else that did actually appear in written form. However, three participants expressed concern about more specific and numerous referrals to empathy being added to course outlines. Their concern was generally that further inclusion of language around empathy, or discussion amongst faculty and administrators, might lead to misunderstandings about the centrality of empathy, and might interfere with how they currently teach related to the concept. As A.Z. said:

I don't think I will call it that [i.e. empathy in planning documents]. I don't know whether there'd be a resistance. I think there is a beauty to realizing that you can care about something without someone saying this is how you do it and naming it ... although I realize it's at the heart of the assignment ... I am protective of the experience I think my students are having in my class.

The fear expressed here is that formalized inclusion would both isolate and therefore minimize the infused quality of empathy in their disciplines, and that specificity around the concept and its teaching could mean the elimination of their current ways of teaching and modelling.

All participants in the study said that they would be interested in further opportunities to communicate about the teaching and learning of empathy with other educators. Fourteen out of sixteen were very interested in the suggested idea of an interdisciplinary community of practice. Further, seven participants mentioned that getting ready for the interview itself and the subsequent interview process had been professionally stimulating in getting them thinking and discussing the importance of empathy in their professions and about how they teach and model empathy with their students. Two participants expressed some concern about further dialogue regarding the teaching and learning of empathy related to issues with the formalizing of empathy-related language in course outlines. Both worried that discussion and examination of 'best practices' in teaching and learning of empathy may lead to having to move away from approaches they have found effective.

Analysis Synthesis

The four main themes that emerged from analysis were: a) a common understanding of empathy involving 'putting yourself in another person's shoes', with those teaching the clinical use of empathy generally adding empathic reflection; b) general agreement that empathy is crucial in a wide variety of disciplines; c) a wide variety of teaching approaches are utilized, with an emphasis on hands-on opportunities for practicing the use of empathy; and d) participants generally reported that current levels of discussion about the teaching and learning of empathy were generally low, and they would be interested in participation in an interdisciplinary community of practice going forward. Several subthemes not included directly in these larger categories were: participants emphasizing the use of empathy towards students and hoping for more empathy in college communication overall; a few participants expressing concern about further light being shone on definitions and teaching practices; and several participants discussing the larger value of empathy during challenging societal times.

Discussion

As Buckley (2017) suggests, a grounded methodology is helpful when trying to develop a theoretical framework for a phenomenon of interest. The findings of the current study combined with the existing body of literature have contributed to the formation of a partial, tentative theoretical framework regarding the teaching of empathy in college programs. Though this framework could be valuable to college educators interested who believe empathy is a crucial skill for their students and graduates, much more research is needed to deepen and broaden our understanding in this area.

Theoretical Framework

Overall, faculty from a wide range of programs, agreed with the essence of Coplan's (2011) theory that empathy is the ability to use one's imagination to consider what it would be like to have the experience of the other. Faculty were clear that understanding the other's perspective is the central aspect of empathy, and saw this as distinct from feeling sorry for the other (e.g. sympathy). Those teaching courses where students learn to use empathy as a clinical skill also highlighted what Rogers (1957) says is crucial in building a therapeutic relationship, that is, verbal empathic reflection to ensure that clients feel understood, and build their own understanding. These findings suggest that faculty have a fairly accurate sense of what empathy is, even though there is little clear use or definition of empathy in course outlines that inform their courses. That being said, some faculty did not speak about the emotional aspect of understanding of others' perspectives, perhaps an indication that the full complexity of Coplan's (2011) is not present in their definition of empathy. Similarly, though many professors emphasized the importance of valuing the difference in experiences that inform others' perspectives, other participants did not. This raises the question of whether some faculty members may see empathy as imagining what it would be like if *they* were in the other's shoes, rather than fully valuing the distinct experience of others. It is possible, though, that participants simply did not have enough time to define empathy with more detail as suggested above, or that the interview questions were not sufficient to evoke a more nuanced definition. In general, it appears that faculty definitions of empathy are generally accurate and useful, but also that there is room for further sharing and development, as is the case with any complex concept. Further research is required, including asking faculty from a wider variety of programs about their definitions of empathy, to deepen our understanding of the roots of this framework.

The second part of the tentative framework emerging from this study relates to faculty perspectives of the value of empathy. All participants agreed that empathy is an essential skill and orientation in their field, though there were differences in what was highlighted as valuable. All faculty members teaching clinical skill-building courses said that empathy is crucial in building trusting working relationships, which were often discussed as part of the therapeutic process itself. All participants discussed empathy as vital in understanding who clients or patients are, and what they need and want, therefore increasing the likelihood of being effective in a wide variety of jobs. Participants who teach diversity-based courses particularly focused on this, emphasizing how bias in interpreting the actions of others often causes conflict in groups, and leads to professional decisions that do not fit for clients, patients, and/or communities. The better professionals are at putting aside their own assumptions in favour of really trying to understand the perspective of the other, according to these professors, the more likely students are to be able to act effectively in the field after they graduate. That college faculty see empathy as crucial is central is a fairly strong part of the framework, and is supported by many of the research studies, from a multitude of disciplines, discussed earlier in the review of relevant literature (Alrubail, 2015; Bas-Sarmiento et al., 2017; Dean et al., 2017; Decety et al., 2014; Jamal et al., 2021; Razzouk & Shute, 2012). Further research, including with faculty in other disciplines than those interviewed here, will help to deepen and widen our understanding of this aspect of the framework.

Participants in this study employ a variety of teaching strategies to teach empathy, most of which focus on experiential learning opportunities for students. This finding generally correlates with research in the area (e.g., Hill & Lent, 2006) which showed that a number of approaches is more effective than fewer, and that experiential approaches are more effective than verbal

instruction. Study participants also emphasized that empathy as a concept permeates many topics throughout their programs, and so is not isolated to specific lessons on the topic or particular courses. Also, several participants spoke about how they view being empathic towards students as being a vital tool in the teaching of empathy, which is beyond simply modeling as teaching approach. Rogers (1970) speaks of the importance of authenticity and empathy in teaching, as well as therapy, stating that students develop trust with genuine and empathic teachers, just as clients trust authentic and empathic therapists, and that these are necessary conditions for positive change in either circumstance. Whether authentic empathy in professors leads to greater development of empathy in students is an important issue for further study. Though this study and others suggest offer tentative guidelines regarding the teaching of empathy, more specific understanding of the diverse approaches faculty use would be a very valuable addition to this framework regarding the teaching of empathy in colleges.

Finally, it could be suggested that the entire purpose of studying how college faculty understand, value, and teach empathy is based in outcomes. In other words, does it work? Are students in a variety of programs growing in their understanding and ability to use empathy, and if so, how does this contribute to their effectiveness when they are on placements or internships during their programs, and after they enter the field after graduation? The current study does not add to this crucial part of the framework, but does suggest it is a very valuable area of inquiry. Though there has been more research attention paid to effectiveness in teaching empathy over the past couple of decades (Elliott et al., 2018; Hill & Lent, 2006; Levett-Jones et al., 2018; Riess et al., 2012), there is much to learn about the details and nuances regarding how faculty approach this challenge, particularly in college programs.

Conclusion

The tentative framework described above suggests that college faculty understand empathy to be a perspective-taking skill, with faculty teaching empathy as a clinical skill adding the need for verbal reflection of what is understood about the perspective of clients. All participants in this study, from several different programs, agreed that empathy is a crucial and central skill in their fields. Further research regarding definitions and the value faculty place on empathy would beneficially shed further light on how it is understood as a skill more specifically, and perhaps even as an overall orientation to working effectively with others. This might inform more specific language in course outlines, and encourage discussion amongst faculty members and administrators during curriculum renewal, promoting greater focus on empathy in a number of programs. Secondly, though the overall findings of this study indicate that evidence-based practices for teaching empathy (especially combinations of experiential approaches, including modelling) are being utilized extensively, detail about these approaches and individual differences in how they are actually manifested in classrooms is lacking. This is true not only of the current study, but in the research literature as a greater whole. A related need is for more research into alternative, creative approaches to teaching empathy, such as those discussed by Bell (2018) and others, with acknowledgement that research regarding the teaching of empathy should not be used in prescriptive, restrictive ways. As discussed above, the tentative framework does not shed light on student outcomes as a result of the approaches utilized by faculty, or whether there are any specific combinations that are more effective for specific purposes. Hill and Lent's (2006) review suggests some approaches and combinations are more effective in clinical training, but greater clarity and specificity would be helpful.

Since the study utilizes a qualitative approach to data gathering, caution is needed regarding generalizing these findings to other faculty members, other colleges or programs, or other institutions (Cresswell, 2008). Greater breadth in representation across more program areas in future research would shed further light on similarities and differences regarding the teaching and learning of empathy between disciplines. Another potential limitation has to do with participant self-selection bias (Cresswell, 2008). Participants in this study may have wanted to be part of it because of the topic and their pre-existing interest in it, whereas other faculty members who do not see empathy as important may have lacked interest in participating. One way to mitigate this limitation could be to actively reach out to potential participants that may not have been initially interested in the current study, to try and include their perspectives in future studies. Further outreach to faculty from other colleges and programs could also add diversity to the tentative framework presented above.

As an educator and researcher, with a long interest in the meaning, value, and teaching of empathy, I was moved by the experience of hearing my colleagues speak about how important empathy is to them, too. And the study inspires me to continue exploring and researching, to keep working to add to our understanding of how to help students develop this ‘tool of the trade’.

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