

The Profile and Empathy Level of Helping Professionals

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Abstract - *This study looked into the demographic profile and empathy level of helping professionals enrolled at West Visayas State University, College of Education, Graduate School taking up Master of Education (M.Ed.) major in Guidance and Counseling and Doctor of Philosophy in Education (Ph.D. in Ed.) major in Psychology and Guidance. Results showed that the participants taking graduate education in the field of teacher education, psychology, guidance and counseling were generally female, younger and are actively teaching. Majority were beginners in the Ph.D. program. Except for the category on sex where females had significantly higher empathy level than males, all the participants had an average level of empathy. However, looking at their individual mean scores, it appeared that the older respondents, married, are teaching and are finishing their degrees had higher mean. These results seem to imply that the females, those with more experience, married, in the field of teaching, and have more training had higher levels of empathy.*

Keywords: *empathy, helping professionals, demographic profile, helping professions*

INTRODUCTION

Helping professions include a broadly knit collection of professionals, each fitting a particular need or segment of society. Professional helpers are identified with a professional organization, their use of an ethical code and standards of practice and their acknowledgment of an accrediting body that governs training, credentialing and licensing of practice [1].

Helping professions are considered relationship-intensive careers. As such, helping professionals like the psychologists, guidance counselors, and teachers in general must possess certain traits, competencies, and skills that facilitate the development of interpersonal relationship.

Stebnicki [2] asserts that throughout the history of the helping profession, compassion and empathy have been the wellsprings of establishing rapport, building a relationship and achieving optimal levels of the therapeutic functioning with clients/consumers. It is a tool to build the foundation for a trusting, genuine, and therapeutic relationship. Its intention is to build a strong working alliance with others. It requires the professional helper to be an active participant during therapeutic interactions and to be deeply involved with others in a powerful way. If clients are expected

to develop the capacity to understand; express their thoughts openly, honestly and directly; resolve problems on their own, and make good decisions in life, then a high level of empathic communication must be at the foundation of therapeutic alliance.

Skilled helpers such as professional counselors use empathy to build the foundation of a trusting relationship for the purpose of establishing an effective working alliance with others. It is also a means of increasing practitioner's interpersonal effectiveness and in enhancing outcomes with their clients. Thus, empathy can be used as therapeutic leverage. Actually, many in the counseling field suggest that possessing the skills of empathy is needed for one to become a competent helper [3].

Carl Rogers [4] defined empathy early on as the ability to perceive the internal frame of reference of another person with accuracy including its emotional components and meanings as if one were the person concerned, but without ever losing the "as if" conditions. In the later part of his work, he describes it as the ability to enter the private perceptual world of the other person and thoroughly be familiar with it. It means temporarily living in the other's life, moving

about in it delicately without making judgments. This implies that for the time being a person lays aside his own personal views and values so as to understand another's world without prejudice. It involves being sensitive, moment by moment, to the changing felt meanings of the other person or whatever that person is experiencing.

Rogers (1959) as cited in Hakansson and Montgomery [5] explained further that the state of empathy or being empathic is to sense the hurt or pleasure of another as he senses it and to perceive the causes thereof as he perceives them, but without ever losing the recognition that it is as if he himself was hurt or pleased and so forth.

Empathy as a way of being according to Rogers [4] is also a form of communication that involves attending, listening, observing, understanding, and responding to the concerned others with a deep respect and genuineness. Empathy involves being aware of the other's meta-communication through eye contact, body language, silence, tone of voice, gestures, facial expressions, physical space, and many other methods.

Also, Dymond (1949) as mentioned in Stueber [6] describes empathy the way Rogers does as the imaginative transposing of oneself into the thinking, feeling, and acting of another person and so structuring the world as he does. He suggested test empathic ability by measuring the degree of congruence between person A and a person B's ratings of each other on six personality traits – such as self-confidence, superior-inferior, selfish-unselfish, friendly-unfriendly, leader-follower, and sense of humor – after a short time of interacting with each other.

Goleman [7] frequently refers to empathy as an essential trait in people who are emotionally intelligent. In tests with more than 7,000 people throughout the world, it was found that those people with empathy proved to be “better adjusted emotionally, more popular, more outgoing, and perhaps not surprising – more sensitive.” He also pointed out that having the ability to understand how other people feel can help a person in all walks of life: friendship, romance, parenting, teaching, coaching, sales, managing, counseling, ministering, and so on.

In addition, Goleman [7] states that much evidence testifies that people who are emotionally adept – who know and manage their feelings well, and who read and deal effectively with other people's

feelings – are at an advantage in any domain in life.” Empathy is the fundamental “people skill.” Empathy is the ability to vicariously put oneself into another person's position and feel what he or she is feeling. This feeling can be one of great joy or sadness. Stebnicki [2] also affirms that it builds a relationship that is open and honest. If facilitated appropriately, empathy can build the client's self-awareness, be an impetus for personal growth and change, and spark new ways of thinking and learning. The intentional and conscious use of empathy during client-counselor sessions appears to be integral to the helper's way of being with the client both verbally and nonverbally.

Empathy is not simply responding to what the other person feels for people can never really totally understand and sense another's pain and suffering. The underlying premise of acting empathetically is that compassion for another human being moves a person so deeply that he/she instinctually has a desire to help that individual. If compassion is the true motivation to help others, then one can act compassionately using the skills of empathy. Despite the fact that one can never totally experience the other person's grief, pain or loss, it is critical that he/she forms an understanding and a working definition of the individual's unique emotional experiences as it relates to that individual's life.

Indeed, empathy is important since every person has differing perspectives. We all experience moods, pain and hurt, joy and sadness, and we tend to be so limited when we only see our own perspective. Without taking a moment to assess another, it is easy to make assumptions and jump to conclusions. This often leads to misunderstandings, bad feelings, conflict, poor morale, and even separation or divorce. People do not feel heard or understood. When one uses empathy to understand why someone is angry or when a child is acting out, for instance, he/she might learn that something happened at home that is upsetting. Instead of reacting to the emotions of another or becoming defensive, questions may be asked about their behavior or emotional state. There still may be a need to discipline them as consequences to their behavior, but by being empathetic first, the person feels valued and heard; therefore they will more readily accept responsibility for their actions. Empathy might be the missing link in families, in schools, and in workplaces. As they grow up, kids can often be mean to each other. If empathy is taught early in life then perhaps children would grow up being

more loving and tolerant and understanding of each other Donley [8].

Empathy has been described in a variety of ways, such as “an end result, a tool, a skill, a kind of communication, a listening stance, a type of introspection, a capacity, a power, a form of perception or observation, a disposition, an activity, or a feeling.” Nash [9] discussed that with the need for parental care for mammals in order to survive, grow and develop empathy, must have evolved in mammals evidently can be traced back in mammalian evolution. Empathy may have developed since parental care is required for the development of all mammals and transmitted the emphatic genes to the next generation. As social psychologist, Martin Hoffman said, “empathy” is actually the human concern for others, the glue that makes social life possible. Hoffman concurs with Nash idea that as early as 1981, empathy has been shown to be a result of heredity.

Like intelligence, empathy is a heritable trait but its expression or development is basically dependent on the organism’s environment. Similar to intelligence, one’s “empathy quotient” is the result of the interaction of nature and nurture. Empathy is wired as an instinct in the human brain; however, due to the plasticity of the brain, empathic skills development is influenced by environmental circumstances [9].

Empathic communication is important in the helping relationship. In fact, it is a way to build the foundation for a trusting, genuine, and therapeutic relationship. It helps build a strong working relationship with others. If the skills of empathy are not present within person-centered interactions, there will likely be very little respect, understanding or compassion communicated to the individuals being helped. Otherwise, there is a risk that the therapist will respond with an attitude of indifference, apathy, and overall lack of concern for others [2].

Hence, it is vital that helping professionals model this deep level of awareness, understanding and responding during person-centered interactions. Accordingly, to be competent and effective communicator, it is essential that professional helpers hold positive beliefs about themselves have healthy self-concept, possess values that respect other people and cultures, are able to truly listen and understand others, and possess the skills of empathy [2].

The participants in the study as professional human helpers must possess emphatic skills so that

they will be effective in their work since the presence of empathy is an important component of all therapeutic relationships. Thus, there is a need to determine their profile as well as their level of empathy. These data from the graduate students engaged in helping professions can be used as bases for coming up with intervention programs in graduate education such as the conduct of empathy development trainings, improving and or reviewing curricular programs including career guidance and counseling.

This is in view of the fact that empathy as articulated in the counseling and psychology literature is a skill that can be both developed and learned if facilitated by a competent professional. Barone., et al. (2005) as cited in Stebnicki [2]. Therefore, it is of primary importance that counselor education including other helping professions such as teaching, guidance and counseling medical professions, social work, community development worker, etc. look into how the development of empathy can be incorporated in the pre-service education and training provided to these group of professional human helpers.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This study determined the demographic profile, in terms of sex, age, civil status, nature of work, curricular programs and graduate school status, and level of empathy of helping professionals. The participants were enrolled at the West Visayas State University, College of Education Graduate School, Main Campus, Iloilo City, Philippines taking up Master in Education major in Guidance and Counseling, and Ph.D. in Education major in Psychology and Guidance, Academic Year 2011-2012, and 2012-2013.

METHODS

The descriptive method of research was used in the investigation. A total of fifty-four (54) graduate students enrolled in the Master of Education major in Guidance & Counseling and the Doctor of Philosophy major in Psychology and Guidance programs of the West Visayas State University College of Education, and Graduate School Main Campus, Iloilo City, participated in the study.

The data gathering instrument was the questionnaire which has two parts. The first part gathered information on the demographic profile of the participants which included: sex, age, civil status,

nature of work, curricular programs and graduate school status. The second part was the Empathy Scale developed by Tamborini and Melter [10] utilized to gather the data on the participants level of empathy. The scale is made up of 34 statements. It covers five areas, namely; Empathic Concern with 10 items; Personal Distress with 7 items; Perspective Taking 7 items; Fictional Involvement, 5 items; and Emotional Contagion 5 items.

Numerical points were assigned to the responses. The points were added and the sum was the participant's score. The participants were then classified as those possessing high, average or low empathy. (Please see legend of Table 1)

Prior to the administration of the research instrument, the researcher met and explained to the participants the purpose of the study and sought their consent and permission to be part of the research undertaking. After which the questionnaire was personally administered and these were immediately retrieved, scored and tabulated. Data were processed using the SPSS Ver. 11.5

Frequency count, mean, and standard deviation were the descriptive statistics used. The Mann-Whitney U and Chi-square were utilized for the inferential statistics.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Table. 1. Profile of Participants (N=54)

| Categories | f | % |
|----------------------------------|----|-----|
| A. Entire group | 54 | 100 |
| B. Sex | | |
| Male | 7 | 13 |
| Female | 47 | 87 |
| C. Age | | |
| Younger (39 & below) | 33 | 61 |
| Older (40 & above) | 21 | 39 |
| D. Civil status | | |
| Single | 24 | 44 |
| Married | 30 | 56 |
| E. Nature of work | | |
| Teaching | 34 | 63 |
| Non-Teaching | 20 | 37 |
| F. Curricular programs | | |
| M. Ed. | 25 | 46 |
| Ph.D. | 29 | 54 |
| G. Graduate school status | | |
| Beginners | 34 | 63 |
| Half-way | 9 | 17 |
| Finishing | 11 | 20 |

Data in Table 1 revealed that out of 54 respondents, 47 or 87 percent were females, and 7 or 13 percent were males. As to age, 33 or 61 percent were younger (39 & below), and 21 or 39percentolder (40 & up. When civil status was considered, 24 or 44percentwere single, and 30 or 56 percent were married In terms of nature of work, 34 or 63 percent were teaching, and 20 or 37 percent were non-teaching. When grouped according to curricular programs, 29 or 54 percent were into the Ph. D. program and 25 or 46percent were in the M. Ed program. Finally, when the participants were grouped as to their graduate school status, 34 or 63percent were beginners, 9 or 17 percent were half-way, and 11 or 20 percent were finishing their respective curricular program.

Level of Empathy of Helping Professionals

The majority of the respondents has an average level of empathy (M = 117.02, SD = 12.692).

Likewise, when they were categorized as to sex both male (M = 100.29, SD = 17.366) and female (M = 119.51, SD = 9.864) have average empathy level though the females showed higher mean than the males.

When classified as to age, both younger helping professionals (39 & below) (M = 114.48, SD = 14.005) and older helping professionals (40 & above) (M = 121.00, SD = 9.263) have also average empathy level although the older respondents had higher mean.

As to civil status, both single (M =112.67, SD =15.786) and married (M =120.50, SD = 8.279) had average empathy level though married respondents showed higher mean than the single respondents.

The results further revealed that when nature of work was considered, both teaching (M = 119.32, SD = 10.915), and non-teaching (M =113.10, SD =14.722) helping professionals have the average level of empathy in favor of those who are teaching.

When grouped according to curricular program, M. Ed (M =116.68, SD =14.927) and Ph.D. (M =117.31, SD =10.664) helping professionals had average and almost the same empathy level.

Finally, when helping professionals' graduate school status was considered, beginner (M =116.41, SD =13.050), half-way (M =114.00, SD =13.657) and finishing (M = 121.36, SD =10.595) helping professionals had average empathy level. However, those finishing got higher mean.

The result showed that the empathy level of the participants is generally “average”. This might be due to the fact that the group can be in a way considered homogenous since they are all enrolled in the graduate school and taking highly related degree programs, all considered as helping professions even if they may vary in some aspects.

Table 2. Level of Empathy of Helping Professionals

| Categories | M | SD | Description |
|----------------------------------|--------|--------|-------------|
| A. Entire group | 117.02 | 12.692 | Average |
| B. Sex | | | |
| Male | 100.29 | 17.366 | Average |
| Female | 119.51 | 9.864 | Average |
| C. Age | | | |
| Younger (39 & below) | 114.48 | 14.005 | Average |
| Older (40 & above) | 121.00 | 9.263 | Average |
| D. Civil status | | | |
| Single | 112.67 | 15.786 | Average |
| Married | 120.50 | 8.279 | Average |
| E. Nature of work | | | |
| Teaching | 119.32 | 10.915 | Average |
| Non-Teaching | 113.10 | 14.722 | Average |
| F. Curricular programs | | | |
| M. Ed. | 116.68 | 14.927 | Average |
| Ph.D. | 117.31 | 10.664 | Average |
| G. Graduate school status | | | |
| Beginner | 116.41 | 13.050 | Average |
| Half-way | 114.00 | 13.657 | Average |

Legend: 126 – 170, High; 80 – 125, Average; and 34 – 79, Low.

Differences in the Level of Empathy of Helping Professionals Classified as to Age, Sex, Civil Status, Nature of Work, and Curricular Program

The helping professionals differed significantly in their empathy level when they were classified according to sex, $Z = 2.015, p = .044$.

No significant differences were noted in the empathy level of helping professionals classified according to age, civil status, nature of work, and curricular program. Obtained Z 's were: .499, .392, .089, and .764, respectively. All p 's > .05.

This particular result may be due to the same reason stated above as cited in some studies that females are more empathic than males. Further, the participants were in a way homogenous since they belong to the helping profession and were all enrolled in the graduate school.

Table 3. Mann-Whitney Test Results for the Differences in the Level of Empathy of Helping Professionals Classified as to Age, Sex, Civil Status, Nature of Work, and Curricular Program

| Category | Mann-Whitney | Z | Asymp. Sig. |
|--------------------|--------------|--------|-------------|
| Age | 319 | -.676 | .499 |
| Sex | 108 | -2.015 | .044* |
| Civil status | 324.50 | -.856 | .392 |
| Nature of work | 271.50 | -1.700 | .089 |
| Curricular program | 350 | -.300 | .764 |

$p > .05$

Table 3 shows that no significant differences existed in the level of empathy of the respondents when classified as to graduate school status, $\chi^2 = 3.585, df = 2, p = .167, p > .05$.

Basically, the participants were enrolled in highly related curricular programs and they belong to the same college of the university. The admission requirements in the graduate school include a written examination and a personal interview. This is to ensure that students admitted in the different degree programs have the potential for graduate work and educational leadership (WVSU, College of Education Graduate Bulletin of Information, 2011). [11] Similarly, during the interview the program advisers of the different degree programs look into the personal traits and skills possessed by the applicants or their potential to develop these skills and match these with what are needed in the practice of the applicants' chosen field of specialization or degree programs. Hence, more likely, regardless of their graduate school status they have almost the same level of empathy although looking at their mean scores those that are finishing their degrees have higher levels of empathy.

Table 4. Relationship Among Variables

| Category | Chi-square | df | Asymp. Sig. |
|------------------------|------------|----|-------------|
| Graduate school status | 3.585 | 2 | .167 |

$p > .05$

Chi-square Results Showing the Relationship Among the Different Demographic Variables and Level of Empathy

Data in Table 5 revealed that positive and significant relationship existed between the helping professionals' sex and empathy level ($\chi^2 = 8.418, p =$

.015). No significant relationships existed in age, civil status, nature of work, curricular program and graduate school status, and empathy level. All p 's > .05.

The result is consistent with the commonly held stereotypes and popular culture which suggest that women have a greater capacity for understanding others' thoughts and feelings than do men [12]. Also, empirical researchers have found that gender differences in empathy commonly indicate that women have higher levels than do men [13]. Further, research of Klein and Hodges [12] indicates the possibility that these differences may be the result of motivation rather than ability. Regardless of the cause, women appear to be more empathic than men.

Conversely, the other demographics such as age, civil status, nature of work, curricular program and graduate school status did not really make a significant difference in terms of their level of empathy. Again, perhaps this may be probably due to the similar nature of their careers belonging to the helping profession. However, their individual mean scores appeared that the older ones, married, are teaching and are finishing their degrees had higher mean.

Undeniably, the result of the study confirmed that women, in general, are more empathic than men. Perhaps, this is due to what is commonly referred to as their "maternal instinct." This is in concurrence with the findings of Baron-Cohen as cited in Nash [9] that notably more females had "empathic brain" while more males had "systemizing brain." He theorizes that systemizing was an evolutionary advantage for male hunter-gatherers and empathizing was useful for female caregivers.

Moreover, studies on empathy constantly reveal that females are more empathic than males. Parsons and Bales [14] stated that at least a generation of gender-role researchers have repeatedly found evidence of a cultural stereotype suggesting that women are relatively communal, expressive, and other-directed. Whereas, men are relatively agented, instrumental, and self-directed. These findings are complemented by studies cited by Manstead (1992), in which women were rated as being more emphatic than men. Hojat et al., [15] likewise reported that women demonstrate more empathy than men and express more caring attitudes.

Similarly, a research by Brovenman et al. [16] showed a general belief that the ideal woman exhibits "warmth and expressiveness" and is more "sensitive to the feelings of others". Whereas, the ideal man is perceived as "less sensitive of the feelings of others. Eisenberg and Lennon [17] observed that, without exception, when males and females were asked about their empathic ability and the extent to which they adopted the emotions of target individual, females reported greater self-perceived empathy and considerably more emotional matching than males.

Further, in general, in the natural order of things, it follows that the older generation exhibits higher level of empathy. They have gained more insights about human nature and a deeper understanding of their responsibilities. Findings revealed that growing old gives wisdom, profound knowledge and deeper understanding of people, events and other happenings around them as mentioned by Bulusan [18]. Also, Piguerra [19] pointed out that teachers have acquired skills and experience through the years of their long service. As they grow older, they tend to be more satisfied with their profession because they have lower expectations and better adjusted to their work situation Rodes as cited by Butuan [20].

As for married people having a higher level of empathy compared to the single ones, studies have

Table 5. Chi-square Results Showing the Relationship of the Demographic Profile and Level of Empathy of Helping Professionals

| Demographic Profile | Level of Empathy | |
|------------------------|------------------|------------|
| | χ^2 -value | p -value |
| Sex | 8.418 | .015* |
| Age | .847 | .655 |
| Civil status | 1.552 | .460 |
| Nature of work | 3.590 | .166 |
| Curricular program | 1.661 | .436 |
| Graduate school status | 4.665 | .323 |

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Helping professions are relationship intensive careers which necessitate that one possesses the traits, competencies, and skills that would facilitate the development of interpersonal relationship as well as healthy coping and adjustment.

Empathy, as a tool for building a strong working alliance with others, is being viewed as a critical skill in almost all helping therapeutic endeavors. Therefore, helping professionals are expected to possess emphatic skills.

found that viewing the emotional display of another person more often can induce a corresponding emotion in the observer Levenson and Ruef (1997) as cited in Verhofstadt et.al [21]. Given the fact that these emotional reactions are often extended to our closest intimate Hodges and Wegner (1997) cited in Verhofstadt et al. [21], it seems likely that when a potential support provider or partner is confronted with a distressed spouse, a certain level of emotional similarity is likely to occur. Hence, married people are more apt to develop empathic skills.

Teachers have higher empathy level since they do not merely teach knowledge and information to students but by necessity have to deal more often with a variety of classroom situation which requires the use of skills that are involved in responding to students' interpersonal, social and emotional needs Kotller [22]. Positive personal interaction supports high-quality levels of engagement in learning and higher quality behavior in valuing and sharing a relationship. Likewise, an attitude of care in teaching and learning is communicated through the expression of empathy in one-on-one relationships Cooper (2002) as cited in Cooper [23]. Showing that the teacher cares creates the right climate in which students learn most effectively. Given the nature of the work, and consistent with the result of other studies, the result of the present research showed that teachers were more empathetic.

Studies suggest that empathy decline has become a social phenomenon in young Americans. A possible explanation for this observation this may be due to "information flooding" which begun after the year 2000, as well as the increasing use of communication technologies. These phenomena has resulted in a kind of "emotional anesthesia;" that is people's perceptions of their thoughts and emotions may be increasingly suppressed Neumann et al. [24]. This trend may not only be true among Americans but also among other nationalities, as well including Filipinos.

In cognizance of the value of empathy in facilitating therapeutic relationships, it is therefore recommended that an Empathy Development Training Program shall be included as part or component of the pre-service or in-service education and training of helping professionals such as teachers, guidance counselors, psychologists, medical personnel, social workers, and community development workers.

Moreover, owing to the fact that this research was conducted in a graduate school setting among helping

professionals, the results may be further validated by replicating the study to include more participants and conducted in actual and diverse work settings.

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