

## *Empathy and the Counselor's Role*

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### **Abstract**

This essay is an attempt to capture the essence and the nature of counseling as reflected in use of empathy in the specialized role of the counselor. Emphasis is purposefully placed upon the defining and delineating what empathy is and is not. A short literature review is included. The remainder of the essay speaks to the description and utilization of the essence and skill of empathy as an essential tool within the process of counseling.

The following quotation captures in brief both the sum and substance of the counseling domain. It additionally gives some clue as to the core qualities at work in effective counseling.

The core capacity at work here is access to one's own feeling life—one's range of affects or emotions: the capacity instantly to effect discriminations among these feelings and eventually, to label them as a means of understanding and guiding one's behavior...the ability to notice and make distinctions among other individuals and, in particular, among their moods, temperaments, motivations, and intentions (Gardner, 1983, pg. 239).

### **Introduction**

Campbell (1976) expresses the following in relation to consciousness and problems: We cannot think except in terms of problems. It is the growth of the conscious mind, that we must thank of the existence of problems. Instinct is nature and seeks to perpetuate nature while consciousness surrounds itself with cultures and progress and confusion. This is no doubt in nature only in consciousness.

...For in treating the problems of psychic life we perpetually stumble upon questions of principle belonging to the private domain of the most heterogeneous branches of knowledge. They are symptoms of the psyche.

...Intuition is an unconscious process in that its result in the irruption into consciousness of an unconscious content, an instinctive act of comprehension. The unconscious is the source of the instinctual forces of the psyche and the forms or categories that regulate them, namely the archetypes... This is particularly true of religious ideas, but the central concepts of science, philosophy and ethics are not exceptions to this rule (P. 38, 40).

The archetypes with which Jung is exclusively associated and to which he later referred to as the objective psyche, behave as if they existed before and after our personal existence. They are the visible representations of our universal psychic structure and serve as preconscious potential for the uniquely human capacity for realization. It is through this notion that one is caused to

understand the age old observation that experience is the best teacher. Campbell expresses the concept even more succinctly.

It is the unconscious which contains the seeds of future conscious thought. Its activity is that of grouping and regrouping its content. By content is not meant the personal ideas of the individual but of thought-patterns which have to do with structure rather than that to which structure is applied. The analogy of formatting a word processing document comes close to capturing that function association with the role of instinctual thought patterns (p.46).

### **The essence of counseling**

The essence of counseling can be found in a single term, empathy. The capacity by which one human being may gain an understanding of the inner feeling world of another is neither by happenstance or magic. The counseling relationship requires the utilization of a specialized domain of awareness in the same sense that for two persons to converse regarding history or mathematics, similar functions must simultaneously transpire within each of the participants. It is the rational function of feeling by which the concept of meaning is addressed within the individual and in society.

Feeling is the function whereby people arrange the content of consciousness according to their values. People who live their lives according to the feeling function tend to be sensitive to what most to others, develop a need for affiliation, and a desire for the preservation of past values (Hall & Lindzey, 1978, p.10).

In an effort to address the need for the compensation of thinking with the rational function of feeling, the development of counselors and counseling are those specialized individuals charged with the task of balancing thinking with feeling.

### **The feeling intellect**

The writings of Philip Reiff (1990) on the subject of aesthetics, establishes the relationship of aesthetics, rapport and empathy. It is axiomatic to say that the nature of the problem dictates the nature of its understanding. Therefore, the conventional feeling based dilemma in the client existing as a function of his or her emotional reflection can be known to the counselor through a complimentary function, namely the feeling representational system.

Without feeling the intellect is blind. In older language of faith, the feeling intellect was continually represented as that mindfulness of higher truth within which all life finds its decisive meaning. Feeling intellect recognizes what is cannot see directly... (p.56).

English (1964) defines empathy as the apprehension of the state of mind of another person without feeling what the other feels. While the empathic process is primarily intellectual, emotion is not precluded, but it is not the same emotion as that of the person with whom one empathizes. The attitude of empathy is one of acceptance and understanding. Empathy is conscious projection. The empathic response borrows from the personal feeling life of the

counselor and assumes a consciousness of that feeling life (Corey, 1991).

A literature survey by Ham (1990) elaborates the salient traits of empathy. These include cognitive flexibility, cognitive differentiation, perceptual sensitivity and the tolerance of ambiguity. Also linked to empathy are descriptors such as openness, permeable boundaries and the capacity for non-judgmental responses.

McCrae (1992) adds a dimension of validity to the connectedness of personality and empathy through his findings. He reports factor loadings that combine personality facets of fantasy, aesthetics, feelings, ideas, values and actions.

## **Summary**

The capacity of the counselor to contribute structure to the client's dilemma can be viewed as a process of translating the subjective feeling into a conscious format through the utilization of interpersonal principles. To more fully understand the nature empathy is to provide for increased efficiency in the recognition and development of potential within the profession of counseling.

In Goleman's book, Emotional Intelligence (1995) the author expresses an opinion that the roots of altruism are empathy and ethics. He further states that "empathy builds on self-awareness; the more open we are to own emotions, the more skilled we will be in readings feelings" (p.96). The ability to know how another feels is truly based on one's own life experiences and from these life experiences we are able to have empathy for others. That ability at work is the core capacity in the personality of the counselor.

Appell (as cited in Glanz, 1963) observed that the single most important variable that the counselor contributes to the counseling process is his or her own personality. Goleman (1995) cites Hoffman, an empathy researcher, as arguing "that the roots of morality are to be found in empathy" (p. 105). Hoffman went on to say that "beyond the immediate link between empathy and altruism in personal encounters...putting oneself in another's place, leads people to follow certain moral principles" (p. 105).

The feeling intellect is used in the context of this article to designate the essential nature of the capacity to engage another human being in meaningful interaction. Communication with as different from communication about entails the capacity to recognize the emotive reflections of the feeling content.

It is the feeling representational system of the counselor which provides the "as if" awareness of the client. Through the template of reflection and organizing principles, counselors generate the necessary insight to apperceive the client in a creative manner. Gardner (1993) describes the "core capacity and able to notice and make distinctions among other individuals and in particular, among their moods, temperaments, motivations and intentions" as interpersonal intelligence (p.39). Examined in its most elementary form, the interpersonal intelligence entails the capacity of the young child to discriminate among the individuals around him and to detect their various moods. In an advanced form, interpersonal knowledge permits a skilled adult to

read the intentions and desires—even when these have been hidden—of other individuals and potentially, to act upon this knowledge. This highly developed form of interpersonal intelligence is manifested in the personality of the effective counselor.

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## Biographical sketch

Linda G. English is an Assistant Professor of Counselor Education. She has taught at Henderson State University since 2000. Prior to returning to her alma mater, she taught for three years at Valdosta State University, Valdosta, Georgia. She served for twelve years within the public schools of Arkansas as a teacher and counselor. Currently, Linda serves as president of Arkansas Counselor Educators and Supervisors and has a part-time private counseling practice with Prescott Family Clinic.

