

EMPATHY EXPERIMENT REPORT: A LIFELONG FRIEND AND A CHILD CLIENT

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This presentation of a semester-long counselor-client relationship between the author and her in-class client was submitted as part of a requirement for an introductory masters training course in counseling. It is being published following the faculty member's recommendation that it represents excellent achievement in demonstrating empathetic understanding, process, and outcome. A broader description of the course from which the presentation derives from can be reviewed in Hamilton, Carlson, and Sabol (2001, this issue, pp. 71-97). All participants in the below exercise have provided informed consent to publish this work.

In doing this empathy experiment I had chosen two potential clients originally. As the experiment began to progress, only one of the original clients remained part of the experiment. This was due to the fact that one of my clients at work seemed to be a prime candidate for an empathy experiment and the other initial client did not seem to be very cooperative with "an experiment." The relationship that I had with each of these clients in this experiment is very different. One client I have known all my life and the other is a child on my caseload at work whom I have only known for about two and a half months.

My relationship with the first client has been a lifelong friendship with its usual ups and downs. As kids we pretty much told each other everything. When we became teenagers, boys were the topic of choice. For some reason, Marie has always chosen the least likable guys. The kind of guys that take advantage of her overly kind personality that I cherish so deeply because she is such a good friend. Being friends since kindergarten, we went to school together until the seventh grade. In seventh grade my family moved and I attended a new school, but we remained friends and kept in touch. We then went to college together and that's when our friendship started to get really interesting. While in college, Marie met a guy that she fell head over heels for. Things were great at first, until she found out that he already had a girlfriend. She tells me everything so naturally I can give her my own two cents about the situation. I have always told her that she needs to find someone who will be with her and her alone, but there is something about him that keeps her hanging on for that little bit of hope. This 'relationship' has gone on for a little over five years now and he is yet to move out of the apartment that he and his so called psychotic girlfriend share. Our needs as friends are for me to protect her and her to listen to my advice. Our roles in each other lives are friends. My

expectations for Marie have been for her to find an equally nice guy as herself and let go of this loser that can't seem to make up his mind.

My relationship with my second client has been strictly work related. I have been working with Lauren intensely for about two and a half months. I first met Lauren in a children's psychiatric hospital that I was working in, but that was two years ago and she was only in the hospital for two weeks for a suicide attempt. My past experiences with her have consisted of going to her school to discuss instances with the principal about her acting out, helping her to cope with the loss of her mother and adjusting to a foster family that truly loves her and wants her to be a successful young woman. The nature of our relationship started out as a caseworker and a client, but has slowly evolved into a trusting friendship. Lauren's needs are pretty complicated, but consist of needing to feel wanted, liked and loved. Our roles have been caseworker and client. My expectations have been for Lauren to stay out of trouble, do her school work and continue to improve her personal hygiene skills. I have worked very hard to get Lauren where she is today and continue to strive for any improvement that she is able to obtain. Lauren has been in foster care for so long that there is a lot of background information about her, but also a lot of issues from her childhood that she has not dealt with yet.

The impact of my personal attitudes on my capacity to exhibit empathy with my two clients has been successful with both clients. With Marie, she has been so accustomed to me giving her advice and telling her what I feel is right thing to do that I have never really given her the opportunity to do what she thinks is the right thing. What a bad friend I have felt like throughout this experiment. I have always said " This is what I would do, or Why would you allow him to treat you like that". It was very difficult for me to just sit back, listen and allow Marie to figure it all out for herself. When I finally was able to bite my tongue and allow her to vent without advice from her advice- giving friend, that's when things got really interesting. Marie began to solve her own problems that up to this point she hadn't even seen as problems. Being as good of friends as we were, it was really difficult for me to just listen. I realized that all along I had always commented and Marie knew this. It was uncomfortable for both of us at first, but then I could see how effective it was becoming so I just went with it. After many uncomfortable silences, she begin to talk about how this relationship was going nowhere and that she owed it to herself to give him an ultimatum. He needed to leave his live-in girlfriend or she would no longer be available whenever he wanted to see her. This wasn't exactly what I had in mind, but it was definitely a start. I put my goals for this relationship to the side and used reflective remarks, and restatements to assure her that even though I was not commenting and giving advice, that I was listening. I honestly convinced myself that my thoughts, feelings and behaviors did not matter. This was about Marie, not me.

The impact with Lauren was on the same lines, but also very different. With Lauren, I have been not so much an advice giver, but more so a solid figure for her to use as her frame of reference. I have given her advice, but mostly about the choices that she has made and the effects that they have had on her life. I have done most of the talking with Lauren and she is used to listening with me. It was extremely hard for her to dealwith me listening and not talking. She talked a lot more than usual, I think for two reasons. The first because the silence was really uncomfortable; and secondly, because I was really listening and she enjoyed that.

Because Lauren is much younger than Marie, I felt the need to guide her more

so than Marie. I didn't tell her what we were going to talk about, but I gave her hints that were related to things that were going on in her life. I usually talk with her about her behavior and never really touched upon her "why". I've usually heard her in a context of how she is *expected* to behave. During the course of this experiment, I found that when I just listened, I didn't need to ask why because she talked about it. I presume because she trusted I wouldn't pressure her to defend herself. Lauren has always had a problem with her personal hygiene and although she is getting better at it, she still offends others with her odors and slovenly dress.

One time while we were talking, she began to talk about sexual abuse allegations against an 18 year old cousin. Although this allegation had been documented, Lauren has never really talked about it in depth. She has had many therapists, but in my opinion, never one that she was able to develop a friendship with. Lauren began to talk about her foster father and that she fears that he will try to touch her like her cousin did. Although I knew that this would not happen and wanted to tell her, I didn't. I just listened. Lauren talked about how the kids at school make fun of her when she is incontinent in her pants. She told me that she doesn't care if they make fun of her, because she doesn't care what they think. She recently had a confrontation with a boy at school who was ridiculing her. She told me that she liked him, but was afraid of him because he had 'done things' to another girl at school. She believes he thinks that she is gross because she urinates in her pants. These are seriously in-depth issues that I didn't expect to come out in the course this experiment, but I felt really privileged that she was talking to me about this.

Lauren also talked about her patterns of stealing, and how her mother had stolen things often. I found that when I just listened that it all seemed to come out naturally, including the rights and wrongs that we usually talked about.

The external factors influencing this experiment were different for both clients. With Marie, most of our conversations were on the phone or in restaurants while we were eating. These are usual meeting places for Marie and I. We have made an effort to keep our relationship tight by getting together often to talk and catch up. Our chatting sessions range from 15 minutes to several hours. When we are on the phone we have complete privacy, but in a restaurant, we have a pesty waitress checking in on us to see if everything is alright. That's when the conversation stopped for several seconds until the coast was clear, but usually continued where we left off. Besides the usual waitress check-in or the annoying clicking of call waiting, external factors didn't significantly effect our conversations.

The external factors influencing this exercise with Lauren were abundant. Privacy is hard to come by in a foster home with 2 year old and 5 year old foster siblings, but this can easily be avoided by a trip to the park or a drive in the car. Lauren and I met several times a week for several weeks, due to the problems that she was having in school and at home. Our conversations ranged from 30 minutes to 2 hours. Several times we talked on the phone, but mostly in person. When I would need to go to her school to talk about problems that she was having, there wasn't much privacy and she was not comfortable talking with her teacher and principal in the room. When I would pick her up from school and take her home, that is mostly when we got a chance to talk. Lauren seemed to enjoy just 'spewing' as she called it.

The participants w/ whom I worked were very different. Marie is 26 years old, Lauren is 13. They are both female. Marie was not aware at first of the experiment, but then I told her

when she questioned if something was wrong with me that I wasn't bashing up a storm. Bashing is what she calls my usual reaction to her so-called boyfriend. Lauren was not aware that this was an experiment and did not question other than saying "Aren't you going to say anything." My response was, "I just wanna listen." Both Marie and Lauren can be talkative, but Lauren is usually quiet during our normal casework sessions. She says what she has to and then waits for my response. Marie responded almost immediately that something was very different. Lauren took a little bit longer and thought that I was mad at her or something like that.

I had to suppress my values and not let them interfere. I was able to do this, but I needed to constantly remind myself to just zip it. Marie and Lauren's values and attitudes are very different. This is mostly because of the age difference. Marie values friendship, her family and life itself. Lauren values horses, and more material things. Lauren's father is not in the picture and her mother passed away, but was not very involved when Lauren was growing up. The topics that were presented were really nothing out of the ordinary, although Lauren's topics were much deeper than she usually discusses. Marie talked about her boyfriend, but also about how she was feeling about his behavior and how it was effecting her. I did not initiate any particular content, but I needed to guide Lauren a little as usual.

The benefits of this experiment for me were that I was able to really put myself in the shoes of someone else. I felt really good about just listening and not commenting, especially when it seemed as if it was working so well. Marie was able to step up to the plate after many years and stand up for herself. Lauren was able to talk about her understanding of why she behaves the way that she does and alternate ways of dealing with her anger. I think that both clients really benefited from this type of interaction. Marie told me that she won't resist her feeling to give him an ultimatum, because it is her decision and not someone else's suggestion. She was finally able to see the situation for herself and without my constant input. Lauren did not voice any success story, but she was also unaware of this as an experiment. She did make sense of a lot of things though. She told me that she knows that some of the things that her mother and family had done were wrong and even though they never got caught that they have to live with what they did and this is much worse than getting caught in her mind.

There were definitely limitations to being completely empathic. Marie seemed to call more often and wanted to get together more frequently. I love her to death, but I also have very limited time with work and school. I think that she really enjoyed this type of interaction, because she was making the choices and not just taking someone else's advice. Lauren on the other hand, I don't know how I will be able to go back to plain old casework with her. I am her caseworker, not her therapist, but I guess I can be empathic as a caseworker too. Both may have difficulty going back to the way it was, but maybe I'll continue with this type of interaction since it seemed to be so effective.

There were variables that interfered with my capacity to be empathic. These variables were mostly within me. I had great difficulty at first, not telling Marie what I really thought that she should do. Having an experience mildly similar, I could understand slightly how she must feel to be treated that way. Lauren's experiences as a child were really hard to listen to and make sense of. She has been through so much listening to the details was almost painful. Trying to put myself in her shoes was difficult to say the least. I can't say that I understand, but I did feel her pain. In all of the instances that she has acted out, I am unable to say that I

can't see why this seemed acceptable to her at the time. She has had such a hard life and is only beginning to figure it all out piece by piece.

The variables that were most facilitating to my empathy, would have to be my ability to listen and compassion for helping others to cope with life's difficulties. I have always been considered a good listener by my friends and this is something that I am very proud of. I have always been the type of person to help others to solve their problems though also. Most of the time this involves giving advice. Just listening alone has proved itself to be golden. This experiment has shown me that sometimes when you just listen that the person who is having a problem takes the responsibility of solving their own problem. I don't feel as if I didn't do anything either. I feel as if I had an important part in both of their problem solving. That to me is a good feeling.

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