

EMPATHY EXPERIMENT REPORT: A SISTER AND A BOYFRIEND

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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.

I. Introduction

The two individuals whom I selected for this experiment were both very close to me, but in two very different ways. The first person that I chose was my sister, MaryBridget, who is seventeen and a senior in high school. The second person I chose was my boyfriend Ryan who I have been dating for three years. I obviously have known MaryBridget for her entire life and I have known Ryan for about four years. At first Ryan and I were just friends, I met him in college. Then after about a year of knowing him, we started dating and have been ever since.

My past experiences with both MaryBridget and Ryan are different. For MaryBridget it has kind of been an on-gain off-gain friendship until I went to college when we became closer. I argued much more with my sister when I was in high school and living at home with my family. Now I am living at home again, but I think that when I went away to school we both appreciated the other one more. So in a way the past experiences that I have had with my sister are mixed. At times we were the best of friends and at other times we were barely speaking. Today I think that since we are both getting older, we are not arguing as much on the petty things that used to bother us. In this relationship the needs are pretty much to be there for each other. I know that when I really need someone to talk to, my sister is there. She feels the same way about me. Being the two girls in my family and having three brothers, we have learned to stick together. In the past I have taken on an almost guidance role with my sister, which could be a good thing and also a bad thing. She has sometimes taken on the role of almost "student" when we talk about her problems and I share my opinions and experiences. The expectations that we have for one another vary, but basically

boil down to being a true friend to one another. When there are so many people that hurt you in life, we both feel that we should be the one that is always there for the other person.

When I think of my past experiences with Ryan, I think of all the fun we had when we first started dating. At first it seemed so easy and fun to be in a relationship and we hardly ever fought. We don't really fight now, but we are struggling because we are on different schedules and live about a half hour away from each other. It has been hard to shift from seeing each other all the time when we were in school together, to only seeing each other on the weekends and even then, we are with each other's families. We rarely spend time alone and that is what is the hardest for both of us. This ties into the needs in our relationship. I think that the biggest need that we have right now is to just spend more time with one another. Every time we do get to see each other, we are always with family or other friends. This is hard since we both live with our parents. (But Ryan is moving out Nov. 1st so that will help) I think that we have gotten into a groove of being "buddies" since we can never really be romantic or affectionate without an audience. This is hard for both of us. The roles in this relationship are similar to with my sister. We both want to be there for each other, but in a different way. It is almost like a support system, knowing that I always have Ryan if everything else seems so bad. Ryan had somewhat taken the role of taking care of me and making sure that I am all right. He does this is the perfect way without threatening my independence, but allowing me to know that if I fall, he is there to catch me. I sometimes need that more than anything, just knowing. My role is to be the nurturer in the relationship. Ryan gets stressed kind of easily and I like to be able to comfort him when that happens and be the one who can cheer him up, help him relax, or whatever. It is kind of hard to put into words our relationship, but a caring and loving atmosphere is one of the most important expectations that we both have. We both expect the other one to be there for us when we need them, and despite some petty arguments we have been. Most of the time we just fight about seeing each other and who is coming to which house. Once and awhile we will fight about other things, but hopefully this experiment will help me realize what I may be doing to cause this fights? Overall our expectations are that we love each other and be there for one another, which is so far so good.

For both my sister and my boyfriend I decided not to tell them that I was using them for this experiment. They are both the type of person who would then be looking for me being empathic and trying to call me on it.

II. MaryBridget

First, with my sister I think that overall the experiment was a mixture of success and failure, but I think that I have learned what I may need to do to strengthen our relationship. My self-disclosures were taken more positively with my sister than I had thought. When we would talk about a problem and I would relate to when I may have felt the same way she did, it seemed to make her feel better. Right now she is in a place where she wants a boyfriend. At times I think that she looks at me who has been with Ryan for three years and thinks that I know it all. When I share to her that I felt the same way she did when I was younger, and that even though I am with Ryan, it is still hard and not as perfect as it seems, I think that it makes her feel better. She looks to me as having all the answers sometimes since I am older, and when she sees that I can be just as confused and lost as she is, it is comforting. My values and personal beliefs are a little bit different then those of my sisters. I think that I have learned to think of others first with such a strong psychology and counseling background. She has had

some negative experiences with her peers and finds it hard to think of others, which I can understand. So we seemed to not really agree when it came to beliefs and values and the impact they have on relationships. I think that at this point in her life she has never really had a friend or boyfriend put her first, so it is harder for her to see that. My goals were not really an issue in the experiment with my sister or Ryan. I tried not to really put my goals as a focus of conversation. Whenever I was trying to be empathic I was doing so when my sister or Ryan was sharing with me their feelings or goals. Out of all the empathic responses that I tried with my sister I felt that suggestions and advice giving sometimes worked the worst, while reflective remarks worked out best. When I would give advice I could even hear it myself that it seemed condescending. I know that when I was her age, I didn't listen to advice and I needed to learn for myself the answers to my problems. I think that I sometimes forget this about my sister. Even though I may think I know what is best for her, I need to respect her ability to figure that out for herself. That was the biggest lesson I learned with this experiment with my sister. I need to remember that I don't have all the answers just because I am older and I need to respect the viewpoint from which she is looking at the world. Reflective remarks seemed to be taken positively from my sister. I think that since she is young and most people tend to just take her comments as coming from "just a teenager who has a lot to learn". I think that a lot of times she may think that people are just humoring her when they are listening to her. When I really listened to what she was saying, I think that she truly valued someone taking the time to really hear what it is she was saying.

Some of the external factors that were involved with my sister and I were that we were typically in our home and many times we would be talking and in the presence of other people who would participate in the conversation. There were times when it was just the two of us, but some of the other times there were other people involved and that seemed to get in the way of our conversation. Some other factors were that she often times would not want to talk about issues if we got too in depth with them. She would say, I don't want to talk about something so serious, and just change the subject or watch TV or something. But the majority of the time we would talk while watching TV and the conversation went well and she seemed to be happy to share her feelings. The strongest variable of my sisters that had an impact on this experiment I feel was her age. Being seventeen and still in high school, she often is in a mood to just have fun and not think about serious issues, or she is in a bad mood because of her friends/boys at school and doesn't want to talk. Like I said I did not tell her what I was doing so she was not aware of the experiment. She seemed to respond well when we were alone and I used reflections and this usually resulted in her continuing to talk about her thoughts. Most of the topics we discussed were her relationships with the other girls in school and her ex-boyfriend. These issues are important for her and I think she really valued someone taking them as seriously as she does.

III. Ryan

Now we move onto the experiment with Ryan. I think that Ryan may have been a little more hesitant to accept my behavior when I was being empathic since he has already listened to me describe some of the things we are learning in person centered therapy. I had to be more careful to keep my experiment less "obvious" with him. Again I was met with a mix of success and failure in the different types of empathic responses I gave to him. My personal values and beliefs are different from Ryan in that I am more the type of person who will want to talk about their problems and concerns and Ryan is the type who will react to a situation and then not really want to talk about it and just let it pass. I have not really minded

when he deals with his problems this way, since he usually takes the time to talk when they concern me, since he knows I need to talk about things. I thought that since Ryan didn't talk about his feelings much, it would be interesting to try this experiment on him. Again like I said earlier, I did not typically put my goals in the conversations that we had during the experiment.

For Ryan the best type of empathic response that I gave was the suggestions and advice giving. Unlike my sister Ryan welcomed my suggestions. He often tells me that he thinks that I know how to deal with people better than he does and I think this may be why he welcomed my suggestions, even if he did not always use them. The fact that I was trying to help him find a solution was an important feeling for him to have. Ryan had mixed responses to my clarifying questions. Sometimes he would be appreciative of them and give a remark such as "yes, that is exactly what I mean" and other times he would think that I was not really listening and wonder why I am asking questions. Another empathic response that worked well for Ryan was the reflective remarks. I think that they made Ryan feel like it was okay to have his feelings; and that to him, these feelings were valid and real. A lot of the conversations that Ryan and I had were about the stresses he has at work and the arguments that he had with his mother. Ryan is taking over his father's plumbing business and it is a very overwhelming task. I think that it made him feel a little bit better to know that he could express all of the frustrations of work to someone who wouldn't see them as incompetences. When we talked about his mother it also made him feel better to know that his feelings were being heard on the situation. Often times he and his mother are so alike that they butt heads. It usually leaves him feeling like he may have done something wrong or lost his temper. By listening to him and hearing his feelings on the situation it made him feel more relaxed and helped him see some of the reasons behind his actions. Overall Ryan seemed to respond well to empathic listening and I think that it also helped our relationship. I am guilty of thinking of my feelings in this relationship and this experiment have forced me to see things from his perspective. I may not understand why he sees things the way he does, but it has helped me to realize that the way he sees the situation is the way it is for him. I have found myself not getting angry or upset at some of the little things that I used to since I have a better understanding of the feelings behind his actions. When I sit back and look at the situation from his side, it is easier to explain why he does/says the things he does. So I guess in a way this has helped me to realize that as much as I want him to treat me a certain way, I have to remember to treat him that same way also. I need to remember his feelings also.

There were not many external factors that influenced this experiment with Ryan. I have said that we are not alone a lot, but when we do get to be alone is when I tested the "experiment". I knew that Ryan would not have felt comfortable having these types of conversations with many people, so I purposely waited for times when we could talk about these things alone. However the some of Ryan's personal variables were different. When at times I thought my sister would not want to talk because of her age, I think that Ryan may not have wanted to talk at times because of his gender. I think a little part of him still thinks that a man doesn't talk about his feelings and doesn't let his feelings affect him. Especially when he works with all men and has been raised to be a strong male influence, I think that affected the amount of time he was willing to spend talking about his feelings. Although he did respond to empathic responses, he at times would respond and then change the subject and not want to spend too much time on his feelings.

IV. Overview: MaryBridget and Ryan

Overall I think that the benefits of this experiment far outweighed the limitations. The benefits were that I think that I really listened to my sister for one of the first times without trying to make her grow up too fast and learn things that she has to learn for herself. I actually realized that I was one of those people who just want to tell her what is best for her without letting her learn for herself. At first that was hard to accept, but now I am happy that I saw that so that I could change. I also think that my relationship with Ryan benefited because I am more willing to look at things from his perspective then before. I thought that I was doing this but when I really put an effort into it with this experiment I saw things in a really different way. I think that is really an important thing for me to see since I could have gotten stuck in thinking that I was already doing something that in reality I could have been doing a lot better.

The negative consequences in this experiment can pretty much be turned into positives. The only things that were negative about this, was realizing how the way that I talk to both my sister and Ryan affects them. I saw that sometimes I affect them in a way that may not be best for them, so that is negative. But this experiment showed me how I am doing this and is giving me the opportunity to change for the better.

Sometimes external variables got in the way, like other people in the conversation, or lack of time with the person, but there were some internal variables that interfered. I found myself thinking of how the actions and feelings of my sister and Ryan were going to affect me. That is completely the opposite of being empathic, but it was hard to be completely objective since I am in such close relationships with these two people and their actions and feelings will really effect me. I think that this would be easier in a counseling sessions since I will not have any other relationship with clients other then counselor.

I think that the most facilitating variable during this entire experiment was my ability to be patient and listen. When so much of what goes on in our day-to-day lives is so fast paced, I think both my sister and Ryan appreciated that someone would just take the extra time to listen and really hear what they were saying.

Overall I enjoyed this experiment because of how it helped me view both of these relationships. They are two very important people in my life and I was glad to examine what is working and what is not in the way that w communicate. Even though it is hard to see what you may be doing that is not helpful, it is important to realize it now before you could hurt someone and that is just what I did. I am glad that I could see the way I affect both people by how I listen and talk to them. I learned a lot about these two relationships and hopefully I can change the things that are not really helpful and continue to do the things that are!

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