You Know it When You Feel it: The Aesthetic Qualities of Empathic Expression

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Abstract

The author presents a framework designed to assist the counselor in evaluating the aesthetic qualities of empathic expression. This framework is advanced by the supposition that empathic expression bears aesthetic qualities that are relatable, recognizable, and interpretive. The aesthetic qualities of unity and variety, movement and stability, scale and proportion, and balance function as the design principles through which empathy can be expressed and experienced within the counseling dyad. This process of humanistic counseling includes the conceptualization of empathy as an art entity and empathic expression as the preliminary techniques to initiate its aesthetic design. Empathy becomes vivified when the counselor and client together engage in its construction through a relational dialectic.

Keywords: aesthetic, creativity, quality, dialectic, principles of design

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The counselor’s expression of empathy, an accurate reflection of the client’s subjective experience back to the client, is fundamental to the humanistic counseling goal to understand each client individually. (Hansen, 2000, 2002, 2004, 2005, 2007b; Rogers, 1951, 1957, 1961) The humanistic counselor, uses empathic expression to access, and empathy to share in, the client’s subjective experiences. Empathy nurtures the client’s movement toward increased self-acceptance. (Hansen, 2005; Rogers, 1961) In order for empathy to occur, the counselor must first demonstrate an empathic expression, that indicates a perceptible aesthetic quality to the client. It is this expressed aesthetic quality, that conveys to the client, that their subjective experience is being shared in by the counselor. As this type of sharing within counseling is an inherently artistic process (see Bozarth, 2001; Dewey, 1934; Rogers, 1961), the author argues that the mechanics of empathy, can be appropriately evaluated, using the artistic principles of unity and variety, movement and stability, scale and proportion, and balance. These are the aesthetic qualities that make empathy a creative and humanistic mode of relating in the counseling dyad.

As it develops, empathy fosters therapeutic communication and knowing between the counselor and client’s otherwise privately witnessed sensory, cognitive, emotional, and essential experiences. (Hansen, 2004, 2005) An aesthetic, is a device through which private, epistemic constructions become externalized and given recognizable, meaningful form, to begin the construction of a shared epistemic space, between counselor and client. (see Hansen, 2006; Rogers, 1961) The counselor and client come to know one another, through the ongoing sharing of aesthetic expressions. For the counselor, aesthetic expressions bridge the gap between relating to a client’s private experience, connecting to it, and effectively communicating that connection back to the client. Using dialogue and body language to communicate the aesthetic qualities of unity and variety, movement and stability, scale and proportion, and balance, the counselor introduces a felt aesthetic of empathy.

*The Person-Centered Journal, Vol. 20, No. 1-2, 2013*
Three suppositions advance the author’s stance into practice for counselors. First, empathic expression initiates an epistemic dialectic between counselor and client, wherein truth and meaning are continually derived. This dialectic builds from, and upon itself through the course of treatment and becomes experienced, as a shared epistemology of empathy. Next, as empathic expression bears aesthetic qualities, it is inherently artistic, relying upon the counselor’s creative capacities to give it form. When intentionally expressed by the counselor, the structure of empathic expression is a demonstration of qualities, that the client can recognize as potential reifications of their own private epistemic experience. Lastly, the aesthetic qualities of empathic expression, are described to identify how they become demonstrated in the counseling relationship. The author draws specifically from the principles of artistic design, which include unity and variety, movement and stability, scale and proportion, and balance (Hobbs, 1991) to represent the aesthetic qualities, or recognizable features, of empathic expression.

The author’s suppositions, give the aesthetic qualities of empathic expression, an engaging appeal for humanistic clinicians, who seek new ways of accessing, and making therapeutic connections with, clients’ private experiences. The qualities identified, like the systems of shared experience they evoke, are not presented as fixed categories of expression; they are guideposts to assist counselors in more effectively establishing uniquely meaningful connections with clients. These connections foster experiential transformations for the client, which are valued throughout all counseling traditions as critical to behavioral change. (Hansen, 2004)

**Aesthetic Qualities of Empathic Expression**

Humanistic counselors seek intervention strategies that will elicit demonstrations of their clients’ essential experiences such to collaboratively form inclusive and helpful therapeutic relationships. The author presents a system of intervention that will provide counselors with greater flexibility, and simultaneous professional consistency, in their practice of empathic communication with

*The Person-Centered Journal, Vol. 20, No. 1-2, 2013*
clients. This system, concerned with the utility of aesthetics and quality in the counseling relationship, is as follows: (a) empathic expressions initiate a dialectic between counselor and client who collaboratively advance it into a shared epistemic encounter within the counseling relationship; (b) empathic expression, intentionally presented by the counselor, is an inherently artistic demonstration of a private epistemic experience; and (c) specific aesthetic qualities of empathic expression are evaluated and identified through an artistic formal analysis when its design is approached as a living work of art that is co-created by two individuals.

Conveying Empathy Through a Relational Dialectic

The counselor demonstrates an interest to empathize with a client, through the delivery of empathic expression. When the client interprets this demonstration as compatible with her or his own epistemological system, empathy becomes a shared experience. One’s epistemology, or way of knowing, is housed within one’s private experience, as a relational informant. (Hansen, 2004, 2007a) Counselors can insinuate themselves into the client’s private experience, when they make accurate emotional, cognitive, and epistemic evaluations from which the client operates. (Hansen, 2004, 2007a; Rogers 1951, 1957) As counselors access their clients, using empathy and genuineness, a co-constructed narrative, or jointly experienced therapeutic epistemology, unfolds between the two. (Hansen, 2007a, 2007b; Rogers, 1951, 1957) This collaborative epistemology, conceptualized herein as empathy, begins with the counselor’s unique iteration of the aesthetic qualities (unity and variety, movement and stability, scale and proportion, and balance) that stylize and communicate empathic understanding to the client.

Epistemic differences between counselor and client frames-of-reference are bridged through a dialectic, wherein disclosed content becomes material for therapeutic process which manifests itself as co-constructed truth. (Hansen, 2004, 2007a; Lemberger, 2012) Within the counseling dyad, the dialectic is demonstrated as a three-part structure consisting of a thesis, anti-thesis, and synthesis (see Hegel, 1830/1974; Hansen, 2004, 2007a; Lemberger, 2012).
The structures of knowledge and emergent meanings within the dialectic, to be truly collaborative yet goal oriented, are driven towards a teleonomic design; they are continually and jointly created rather than essentially fixed, found, or discovered (Hansen, 2004, 2007a; Lemberger, 2012). This is to say that the dialectic remains an ongoing dialogue that requires a willing participation on the part of both the counselor and client. As such, the unfolding truth within the three-part dialectic of thesis, anti-thesis, and synthesis remains dependent upon the enduring relationship between the participants of the counseling dyad.

**Thesis.**

The dialectic begins with the counselor’s aesthetic demonstration of an empathic expression. Empathy is formally conveyed when the counselor infuses their own dialogue with the aesthetic qualities of unity and variety, movement and stability, scale and proportion, and balance to characterize how they interpret their connection to the client’s private epistemic experience. Given the innate separation between the counselor and client’s private experiences, the client may or may not interpret such an expression as a close approximation of some element of their own experience, some of which they may not have previously been aware. (Clark, 2010; Rogers, 1957, 1964)

The delivery of empathic expression is positioned as the first step in the counseling dialectic, or the development of a counselor-client shared system of knowing through an aesthetic iteration of a thesis. It is possible to empathize with a client through subjective, interpersonal, and objective means. (Clark, 2010) As such, empathic expressions are aesthetic representations of one of these three approaches. Subjective empathy, is expressed when the counselor uses her or his own experience as a reference against their hypothesis of what the client is experiencing through identification, imagination, intuition, and felt-level comparisons. (Clark, 2010) Interpersonal empathy is expressed out of the counselor’s accurate understanding of the client’s internal frame of reference and their ability to reflect that experience back to the client. (Clark, 2010)
Lastly, objective empathy becomes expressed as a reference against an external construct, such as a diagnostic tool or cultural membership, with which the client identifies. (Clark, 2010) Regardless of whether the expression is subjective, interpersonal, or objective, it attempts to say to the client, “I am with you in your experience.” It is in the next step, anti-thesis, where the empathic expression is demonstrated by the client to have resonated, or not, with their experience.

Anti-thesis.

If, in the dialectic, the thesis belongs to the counselor, the anti-thesis belongs to the client. It is here that the client refutes, accepts, or questions the counselor’s expression through interpretation. (Lemberger, 2012) Unlike the counselor’s demonstration of empathic expression through subjective, interpersonal, or objective means, the author posits that anti-thesis specifically occurs subjectively for the client. One’s referent of interpretation can only be the self, as there is no external agency that can legitimately regulate, approve, or discourage, a person’s genuine response to experience other than their own internal resources. To be sure, the client can use cognitions as instruments, to refute an otherwise accurate empathic expression. For example, a reluctant client may feel empathized-with, but feel compelled to refuse the counselor’s attempts to coexist in empathy nonetheless. Perhaps they have simultaneously determined that it is painful or frightening to be exposed in such a way to themselves or the counselor. In any event, the manner in which the client responds, whether it be welcoming or guarded, is considered a form of participation in the dialectic as anti-thesis. A synthesis of counselor-client epistemologies follows as the next step in this process.

Synthesis.

After the client has interpreted the counselor’s empathic expression, and indicates, if appropriate, to the counselor that the expression is similar to her or his own experience, a synthesis of
previously separate counselor-client epistemic systems results. The author posits that it is this synthesis, which characterizes the therapeutic tone of empathy; it cannot occur without the client’s critical interpretation of its initially expressed quality. That is, empathy requires the alignment, however temporary and fleeting, of two individuals’ epistemic systems. It is then interpreted by the client, and an interconnection between the two parties results. The resultant synthesis from the dialectic structure of thesis, anti-thesis, and synthesis is the “most important of the three, for without it the other two would have no meaning.” (see Bakhtin, 1981; Holquist, 1990, p. 38) Epistemological sharing enables an ongoing co-created truth about the relationship such that the client eventually experiences themselves differently in otherwise unchanging circumstances external to the counseling setting. (Hansen, 2004) Herein lies the artistic nature of empathic expression.

The Art of Empathic Expression

A counselor’s empathic expression is only deliverable by virtue of its aesthetic qualities, which enable penetration into a client’s way of knowing, making use of this space for therapeutic coexistence. The shared and continuously developing relationship between counselor and client, represents a particular therapeutic way of knowing. (Clark, 2010; Hansen, 2007a; Rogers, 1957, 1961, 1964) A way of knowing, or epistemology, is the means through which an individual experiences themselves in the world. (Hansen, 2004, 2007a) Individual epistemologies are expressed through aesthetic demonstrations of quality, giving recognizable value to experiences. In the counseling relationship, aesthetic expressions give relatable form to the content of one’s epistemic constructions as means to relate and engage in self-expression. (Provine & Lemberger, 2012; Rogers, 1961)

The act of giving recognizable form to any conceptual design or experience, through the application of aesthetic quality, is fundamentally an artistic process. Entities that are newly constructed using materials, people, or circumstance are products of creativity. (Rogers, 1961) One’s relationship with others, the self, or

to external experience can be crafted into meaning, whether it results in tangible works of art or new experiences. (Dewey, 1934) The counseling relationship requires creativity, as counselor and client collaborate to construct a system of therapeutic relationship that contains mutually appropriate structures of meaning. (Hansen, 2004)

As it is often conceptualized within traditions of art, the aesthetic, or formal style, of a created object functions as the product of truth and meaning, as demonstrated by the artist to her or his audience. (Adorno, 1970/1997) Like art, the act of counseling is a creative process that seeks to produce truth and meaning. (Rogers, 1961) Empathic exploration requires the counselor’s receipt of the client’s disclosures in a trusting therapeutic context that is subjectively appropriate and recognizing of the client’s own self-awareness. (Bozarth, 2001) The author argues that the artistic nature of the counseling relationship owes itself to the aesthetic qualities its participants express to one another within the interview, providing the relationship with its form and initiating the production ongoing of relational truth and meaning. Within this context, the qualities of aesthetic expression function to give recognizable form to the otherwise private and essential experiences of counselor and client. In this way, aesthetic expression in the counseling dyad is the corridor to knowing.

The Formal Analysis of Empathic Expression

Art is an analogue to empathy, as both of these constructs can only be experienced subsequent to the expression of aesthetic qualities. This must be the case, if we are to consider empathy as being subject to formal analysis for the identification of its qualities. The author posits that the principles of artistic design may be used to evaluate the counselor’s intentional demonstration of empathic expression (quality) as a creative act. These principles, unity and variety, movement and stability, scale and proportion, and balance, establish consistency in a work of art, while simultaneously expressing an intended effect, tone, or style to an audience. (Brainard, 1998; Hobbs, 1991) The author suggests that these same allowances can be applied to a counselor’s approach, who will find

*The Person-Centered Journal, Vol. 20, No. 1-2, 2013*
the principles of design present in the conceptual structure of empathy when it is both expressed and experienced in the counseling relationship. That is, empathy, similar to an art object, is demonstrable by the application of the principles of artistic design: unity and variety, movement and stability, scale and proportion, and balance. The iteration of each of these qualities depends upon the ways in which the counselor brings these qualities to bear in the counseling exchange. A counselor demonstrates a sense of connectedness to the client’s experience by utilizing these aesthetic principles or qualities as mechanisms to relate.

While the counselor cannot anticipate the response of the client, nor their internal experience of feeling empathized-with, the qualities of empathic expression provide consistency for the counselor’s own creative approach when they are intentionally demonstrated by the counselor. This provides a grounding effect in the counselor’s work. Take, for example, a Surrealist painter who wishes to express a particular tone or feeling with a painting to her audience. The artist has no control over the epistemic mindset of her audience when the painting’s final form comes to be. Consequently, the artist relies on her knowledge of herself in relation to Surrealist principles, as well as her relation to her audience to meaningfully assemble artistic principles and elements to achieve a particular Surrealist aesthetic. The counselor-as-artist encounters the same responsibility as the Surrealist painter. The counselor must know her theoretical approach well enough, as well as her clients, to deliver the qualities of empathic expression in a way that she believes the client will understand, in a way that represents the client’s epistemic aesthetic. This will enable her to append genuine character to the qualities expressed within a formally perceived empathic aesthetic.

Each of the aesthetic qualities identified herein, are offered as applications to enhance intentionality behind the counselor’s approach. These qualities are expressive precursors to the shared experience of empathy. Empathy requires the unique participation of the client within the relational dialectic in order to occur. The conceptualization of empathic expression in this way is not meant to characterize, discount, essentialize, or reduce the client’s felt

experience. Rather, it is meant to increase the clinician’s capacity to effectively relate themselves to the structural elements of empathy and, as a consequence, to enrich the client’s personal felt experience of empathy (whatever that experience may be for that individual), as it becomes a shared encounter.

**Unity and variety.**

Unity is defined as the representation of a unified whole. (Hobbs, 1991) The aesthetic qualities that give form to unity within empathy communicate the counselor’s spatial, temporal, cognitive, and affective identification with the client’s present experience. The qualities that give empathic unity its form are: reminiscence, physiological sensation, similarity, and presence. When the counselor uses the aesthetic qualities of unity, she or he suggests the following sentiment to the client: “I remember how it felt when I went through something similar.”

Variety, the antithesis of unity, is an appearance of change throughout an artwork. (Hobbs, 1991) The principle of variety in empathy communicates the counselor’s necessary epistemic separateness from the client’s essential experience. Further, variety communicates the notion that the client’s experiences, while perhaps similar to the counselor’s own, may have elicited a different internal response than that of the counselor. The qualities giving variety its form in empathy are: restraint, humility, patience, intrigue, interest, and genuineness. Variety in empathy tells the client, “I am so interested in hearing you tell me how that feels for you in your own words.”

**Movement and stability.**

Movement is represented by the impression of activity within art, while stability demonstrates stillness or stasis. (Hobbs, 1991) Movement, in the counseling interchange is twofold. It demonstrates the counselor’s willingness to move with the client more intimately towards their experience. As well, movement communicates the counselor’s readiness to shift with the client away.

*The Person-Centered Journal, Vol. 20, No. 1-2, 2013*
from that experience toward change or breadth in understanding. The qualities that give form to movement in empathy are: safety, trust, sensitivity, curiosity, supportiveness, agreeableness, and purposiveness. Aesthetic movement says to the client, “You can depend on me to be here with you through this experience.”

Relatedly, stability, as communicated by the counselor, prompts the client to claim ownership and authority over their private experiences. While the counselor remains supportive of the client and their experience, it is important to simultaneously encourage the client to recognize that the client’s capacity to experience things differently belongs only to them; their experience is inherently private and unique. As such, the client must become willing, to some degree, to perceive it with value-added intention (e.g. to learn, to grow), rather than from a place of isolation. Aesthetic qualities giving form to stability in empathy are: confidence, certainty, believability, candor, assertiveness, and pride. Aesthetic stability communicates, “I want to be here with you through this, but I also want you to know that you can handle this on your own.”

Scale and proportion.

Scale is the relative size of a work of art, while proportion is the relationship among parts to the whole. (Hobbs, 1991) In the counseling relationship, scale within empathy is demonstrated as an attempt to characterize the client’s experience as one that is appropriate and relative to their current capacities without reducing the experience itself. Scale in empathy is expressed as: rationality, compassion, openness, and sincerity. Aesthetic scale communicates, “Based on everything I know about you, I believe that it is reasonable for you to feel this way.”

Proportion is represented by the counselor’s indication that an experience can be considered part of a client’s realization of an identified goal. Proportion reminds the client that one experience does not define the larger experience of them in the world. The qualities of proportion in empathy are: confrontation, motivation, love, and inspiration. Aesthetic proportion says, “I don’t see you as
[this experience]. You have shown me that you are worth much more than that.”

**Balance.**

Balance suggests a sense of equilibrium between the tensions present in an art object. (Hobbs, 1991) Balance, from the counselor’s perspective, promotes sameness between the counselor and the client: sameness in humanity and integrity. The qualities that give form to balance in empathy are: respect, recognition, patience, acceptance, esteem, worth, dignity, and forgiveness. Aesthetic balance expresses: “When I look at you I see a human being, nothing more, nothing less.”

These qualities give form to the structure of empathy when it is considered an artistic creation between counselor and client. The efficiency and recognizable delivery of these qualities, as empathic expression, depends upon the counselor’s placement of themselves in the interchange. This means that the form of unity, for example, will be demonstrated differently by the same counselor across clients through time. The presence of a creative and flexible self, as the counselor relates to empathy as an art object, will result in unique demonstrations of empathic expression to equally unique clients.

**Implications for Therapeutic Practice**

The client is the only witness to their private experiences. (Hansen, 2005) Even so, there are instances wherein the client may deem their private experiences as too insignificant to mention, too painful to relive, too complex to tease out, or too abstract to put into words. It follows, that the counselor is there to provide insight and evaluate what is happening within the client’s experience, even the parts that cannot (or will not) be disclosed by the client. Empathy affords the counselor necessary access into the client’s experience, to serve this function. It also affords the client an advocate and source of encouragement. As the counselor has a fiduciary duty to help the client achieve their goals of wellness in a limited amount of time, it is to the benefit of the client that the counselor effectively and expeditiously take steps to elicit empathy.

The counselor is considered an artist as they utilize aesthetic elements to approach epistemic coexistence. When advanced as part of a humanistic approach, aesthetic qualities are expressed as they pertain to the counselor with a professional identity, the client as a separate entity with specific needs of which the counselor has been advised, and the totality of the present relationship between counselor and client. As such, the qualities of empathic expression serve to promote a more frequent and meaningful occurrence of counselor-client connectedness. The qualities of empathic expression, are utilized as the counselor’s expressive agents that give relatable form to the counselor’s intention to empathize with the client’s essential experience through the principles of design.

The principles of design are a uniform foundation from which to engage in creative, yet intentional, therapeutic work with a client. The author argues, that empathy can be characterized as an art object with design features of unity and variety, movement and stability, scale and proportion, and balance. The author concurrently maintains, that this framework, which uses these principles as a consistent system of evaluation, is a non-reductionist means to elicit the essential experiences of a client. These principles do not reduce empathy to a cookie-cutter experience. Rather, they widen the array of aesthetic qualities that the counselor can use to give form to the concept of empathy.

For example, if a painter paints one canvas with blue tones to convey sadness and another with yellow tones to express elation, the two paintings can each still be investigated as unique and varied iterations of the painter’s epistemic experiences using the same set of design principles. Neither painting becomes reduced to any one of the principles used to analyze it. Rather, each painting becomes better understood as its own entity with a particular meaning. Similarly, the counselor’s reliance on these principles to evaluate the quality of the counseling relationship enables greater understanding, enriched relationships, and increased accuracy in empathic expression. Be it a painting or counseling relationship, it is the perceived quality of experience that provides irreducible uniqueness and meaning for those involved.
Conclusion

By using the principles of design, or formal analysis, to evaluate and identify the aesthetic qualities of empathic expression, the humanistic counselor creates genuine opportunities to collaborate with clients in epistemic coexistence. It also enables counselors to make use of themselves, as instruments that supply empathic expression with its relatable form. With continued practice of intentional empathic expression, the counselor will become a more accurate empathizer and enjoy more professionally rewarding relationships with her or his clients. As well, with more frequent instances of feeling understood, clients will experience heightened motivation to participate in the counseling interchange and see improved wellness outcomes. This is a non-reductionist approach that challenges the counselor to infuse their conceptual or theoretical design of empathy with their practical knowledge of the client’s experience in a way that results in true, felt connectedness.
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