

Title: Beyond the Self: The Journey of Empathic Experience

Abstract

This session is designed to facilitate personal, interpersonal and group learning on the process of empathic understanding and the appreciation of another's experience. Drawing on Ickes concept of empathic accuracy, this session utilizes an iterative process that allows students to first test their empathic understanding and then gain insights into the accuracy of their prior understandings and assumptions of another's identity-related experience. The ability to empathically understand another is vital to management and leadership, as well as organizational and global citizenship. Self-knowledge and understanding of others is vital for responsible leadership and compassionate agents of change.

Key Words:

Empathic Accuracy, Critical Incident, Identity

Introduction

This session focuses on empathy as a process, involving both cognitive and affective domains. We emphasize the construct of empathy as a process that requires active listening and active "being with" another individual. Human perception is highly influenced by past experiences of the perceiver and the context of the encounter with another. By engaging in an iterative process, participants in this session will have the opportunity to interact with each other to explore, confirm, expand, and learn from the perspectives of each other. The structure of the activities in this session provides the opportunity for participants to gain a greater sense of the other's experience and to enhance their awareness of how their own first impressions, interpretations, or assumptions might not be accurate nor a comprehensive understanding of the lived experience of the other.

Theoretical Foundations/Teaching Implications

Empathy research is highly multi-disciplinary, drawing from the fields of philosophy, social, cognitive and developmental psychology, clinical psychology, and more recently cognitive and affective neuroscience. Increasingly, it is a topic of study in management education. A recent study of nearly 14,000 students showed that empathy, as measured by the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI), is declining. The average level of the IRI subscale Empathic Concern, meaning people's feelings of sympathy for the misfortunes of others, had dropped most sharply, declining by 48 percent between 1979 and 2009. During the same period, the IRI subscale Perspective Taking, people's tendencies to imagine others' points of view, decreased by 34 percent. The declines are most pronounced between 2000 and 2009. (Konrath,

O'Brien and Hsing, 2010). Another study (Holt, Marques, Hu and Wood, 2017) found that when undergraduate business students were asked to rate ten leadership qualities, empathy consistently scored as the least important factor they identified for leadership success.

The results of these studies are disturbing because empathy has been linked to a variety of management concerns as well as the ability to form rich relationships in life.

McKee (2016) points out that empathy is an important component of emotional intelligence and an essential leadership skill. Wilson III (2015) surveyed business leaders to discover which attributes they believed executives must have to succeed in today's digital, global economy. Of the five critical attributes identified, empathy was highlighted as the most important by executives. In an interview with Kathy Caprino (2016), Richard S. Wellins, Ph.D., Senior Vice President of Development Dimensions International (DDI) stated:

In great part, the ability of a leader to empathize impacts employee engagement, retention and performance. It is critical to good teamwork. It helps fuel customer-centric innovation. Our own research revealed that the correlation between empathy and leadership performance was stronger than any other skill. Our own research revealed that the correlation between empathy and leadership performance was stronger than any other skill.

Yet DDI's research showed that only about 40 percent of leaders assessed were proficient in empathy. And as leaders rise through the ranks, it gets worse (Caprino, 2016).

Empathy is also believed to be essential for ethical decision-making (Baer, 2017; Hess, Beever, Strobel and Brightman, 2017; Agosta, IEP). Baker (2017) advocates challenging students to consider the role that empathy plays in their own decisions and to consider the relationship between empathic concern and decision making in business.

Given the declining levels of empathy in our students, and the importance of empathy to various aspects of management, we believe that it is important to provide students with opportunities to develop their own empathic skills in the classroom.

Ickes, (1997) brought to the fore a key question regarding empathy: How can one person know what another person is thinking and feeling? For teaching purposes, the frame of this question suggests that individuals can become better at understanding the lived experiences and perspectives of others. Ickes set forth the concept of *empathetic accuracy* –the measure of one's skill for inferring the thoughts and feelings of another. This concept underlies the activity in this session. It should be noted that in this session, empathy is not slanted or limited to the understanding of a misfortune, but rather perspective taking -- understanding of an identity-relevant experience or experiences and feelings of another.

Learning Objectives

Participants will:

- Identify “critical incidents” – experiences from their past that they consider central or very important to their own identity.
- Explore “critical experiences” --a series of experiences that over time have consolidated to provide a central touchstone for aspects of their identity which they consider central and pivotal to their perceptions of the world.

- Share their theoretical conceptions of what it would be like to see and act in the world from the identity perspectives of another.
- Reflect individually on the critical incidents and experiences that have shaped their own perspectives and actions in the world.
- Share from their own experience their deeply held perspectives through a first-person account of their lived experience, using an example of their choice from their life.

As a result of this activity, participants will develop a deeper understanding of the roots and foundations of their own perspectives, and expand their ability to deeply and more accurately understand the experiences and perspectives of others.

Exercise Overview: Details of Session Activities and Timeline

| Activity | Time |
|---|-------------|
| Welcome: Welcome! As you know, the topic of this session is Empathy and how to “go beyond” oneself to empathically understand another. We will engage in a set of activities that can be used in management classrooms to aid students in learning more about the value of empathy, their own capacity for empathy, and how one can become more accurately empathetic. Let’s start by each sharing your name and something about your interest in the topic. (Note specific interests expressed) | 10 min |
| Introduction to the Activity: Each of you have received a packet of information when you came in, that contains four 3 x 5 cards (two blue and two yellow) and an instruction sheet, but we will review the instruction sheet to get you started. (Review Instruction Sheet – Appendix A—and emphasize that people can choose to do the first part of this exercise--identifying experiences that have shaped their perspectives and identities--and not share their cards if they choose.) Take any questions from the participants. | 5 min |
| Individual Reflection: Participants are given time to reflect individually and write a statement on each card (up to 4), 2 “critical incidents” that they feel have impacted their world view on the blue cards, and 2 “critical experiences” – a series of experiences over time—that have shaped their identity on the yellow cards. They will record a copy of what they put onto the cards on the sheet provided in the packet to keep for their own reference, and submit the cards to the facilitators (unless they choose not to submit them). | 10 min |
| Facilitation Check: Facilitators check in with the participants and ask if they found the reflection activity difficult, or did examples instantly come to mind? Did they think of more instances than the four, and sort down to just two? | 5 min |
| Formation of groups: Participants form groups of 3, and place their individual cards (blue and yellow) all together in a stack, face down. | 5 min |
| Round 1: Without looking at the cards, one member of each group selects one and reads it out loud. It will have been written by one of the three group members, who will then identify themselves (we will refer to this person as the author). The remaining two will read the card to themselves, and then one at a time, speak, interpreting how they imagine the issue on the card has impacted the world view or | 10 min |

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|---|----|
| identity of the person who wrote the card. This may include how they infer that the person might think, feel, or subsequently interact in the world. | |
| Debrief 1: (Within the groups) The members of the group who have spoken will ask the author how he or she feels about the interpretations they have made. | 10 |
| Round 2: Using the same card, the author will elaborate on the event or series of events that they wrote about on the card. The other two people will then ask questions to seek greater context, test their assumptions, or gain more understanding. This is an interactive discussion, where all three engage in an unstructured dialogue. | 15 |
| Full Group (Class) Debrief: First, the people whose card was chosen, the authors, will be asked how they felt after Round 1; how did they felt after Round 2? Then the individuals who were seeking to understand the author will be asked to share how they felt after Round 2, and what they learned in Round 2 about the author; then asked to share what they learned about themselves and the process of trying to gain an empathic understanding of the author. One facilitator will lead the questioning, the other will post. | 15 |
| Takeaways: Facilitator will ask and post what participants feel are their key “takeaways,” and how they believe the experiences in this session will help them in the future to better empathize or understand others, and how they might use this activity in their classes. | 5 |
| Note: Contact information will be collected from those who participated that would like any of the postings from this session, or the materials | |
| | |

Appendix A: Instruction Sheet in Participant Packet

Appendix B: Teaching Notes

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Appendix A: Instruction Sheet Inside of Packet

In this envelop you will find four 3 x 5 cards, two yellow, and two blue. Reflect for a few moments on the following:

- What “critical incidents” have occurred in your life that have significantly changed the way you view, feel about, or behave in the world. A critical incident would be an event that stays in your memory and caused a shift in your perspective or your identity. Write a brief statement of this on a yellow card; one incident per card. Include the event and your reaction or shift.
- What experiences over time have come to shape you and your sense of identity. These could be related to culture, ethnic background, gender, etc. Write a brief statement of this on a blue card, again, one issue per card.

Take 5-10 minutes to do this.

You do not need to come up with four, two is good. Transcribe what you have put on the cards below for your own records:

Yellow Cards

Critical Incident/Experience 1:

Critical Incident/Experience 2:

Blue Cards

Experience/s over time that shapes your identity 1:

Experience/s over time that shapes your identity 2:

You will be asked to submit your cards to the facilitators, and may be asked to share more about the incident or experience. If you find that there is one or more that is important to you but you don't feel comfortable sharing it, you may keep it.

Appendix B: Teaching Notes

This activity is well-suited for management courses or orientation programs that have goals to increase self-awareness and to increase non-egocentric awareness of others, two competencies that are extremely valuable for effective and powerful leadership. These competencies are also crucial for building good relationships.

The activity works very well in the context of management development, human resource management, organizational development, and ethics courses.

Additionally, this activity is highly valuable for research methods classes, where the goal is to enhance the students' ability to do qualitative research, to understand the other from a broader palate than just one's own personal history. Because the activity is face-to face, the participants have the opportunity to see facial expressions and body language that goes with the questioning. When participants share their deeper experience of an individual incident or experiences over time, they are providing what the anthropologist Geertz referred to as "thick" description. (1973) When students have the opportunity to first posit what they think another would feel or perceive with the basic clues, and then have the opportunity to hear the other's description with richer detail and observe the individual sharing their experience, they have a more contextual experience of the other. This provides an opportunity to gain greater awareness of their own biases, the human tendency to stereotype or overlay past personal experience onto the other, and to develop the listening and questioning skills to understand and empathize with the other at a deeper, richer level.

For the reasons above, when the person is sharing from their own experience with the class, after they have fully expressed themselves, the others are allowed to ask questions to "fine tune" their empathic conception, and to test assumptions that come to their awareness as a result of the activity.

This activity works with classes large and small. It is most effective in face-to-face or hybrid classes, where the activity can be conducted in person, with an attentive facilitator/teacher.

For very small classes, the whole group can participate in Round 1, Debrief 1, Round 2, Debrief 2 (Group). This proposal is written with the step-by-step instructions for the larger groups where you would break the class into groups of 3 persons each.

Since the yellow and the blue cards represent experiences that are categorized as critical incidents and identity- relevant life experiences, this activity can be done focusing on first the yellow and then the blue, and having students observe if there are any different insights or challenges in empathic understanding between the critical incidents or the series of identity-forming life experiences. The authors of the cards may also have experienced differences between the critical incidents and the identity relevant series of experiences.

This classroom activity also can prepare the students for deeper reflection in a writing assignment, expanding what they have learned, and the significance of the incidents and experiences that they themselves recorded as significant to their own lives and identity.

The activity has also worked well with international students, where cultural differences are highly relevant to understanding different perspectives and impacts of experiences.

The activity can foster a closer bond between the students in the class particularly if the class is completely traditional face-to-face format.

(Note in this session at MOBTS the we mixed the blue and the yellow cards due to the limited time; for longer sessions, or for a second exercise the yellow and blue cards can be used for separate rounds.)