

Qualified Empathy – a key element for an empowerment professional

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TIIVISTELMÄ

AMMATILLINEN EMPATIA – KESKEINEN ELEMENTTI VOIMAANNUTTAVAAN AMMATILLISUUTEEN

■ Tutkimuksin on osoitettu, että työn tulokset ovat parempia, jos asiakkaat saavat kokea empatiaa vuorovaikutuksessaan ammattilaisten kanssa (Gerdes & Segal 2011). Toisaalta empatian on todettu vähentävän myös työntekijöiden loppuun palamista (Wagman, Geiger, Shockley & Segal 2014). Tässä katsauksessa tarkastellaan ammatillista empatiaa ja sen oppimista ja opettamista korkeakoulukontekstissa. Kysymme tässä tekstissä, mitä ammatillinen empatia on ja miten sitä voidaan oppia ja opettaa korkeakoulukontekstissa. Ammatillisella empatialla tarkoitetaan tässä yhteydessä moniaistillista tapaa oppia ja opiskella empatiaa (esim. Austring & Sørensen 2006). Tällöin perinteisten oppimis- ja opetusmenetelmien rinnalla myös luovat menetelmät kuten kuvataide ja draama ovat keskeisiä tapoja oppia ja opettaa empatiaa. Sosiaalipedagogisesti ajateltuna ammatillinen empatia ei ole vain ”työväline” tai ”ajattelukehikko” asiakkaan kohtaamiseen, voimaannuttamiseen tai osallistamiseen, vaan se voidaan nähdä myös keskeisenä opiskelijan (tulevan ammattilaisen) ammatillisen kasvun ja ammatillisen toiminnan ytimenä, sosiaalipedagogisena sydämenä. Tässä katsauksessa esitellään NORPLUS-hankkeen ”Qualified Empathy” (2015–2017) aikana Metropolia Ammattikorkeakoulussa ja sen kumppanikorkeakouluissa kehitettyjä monimuotoisia ja luovia opetus- ja oppimismenetelmiä, joiden avulla sosionomiopiskelijoille (n=47) opetettiin empatiaa osana opintojaksoa. Huomio kiinnittyy yksilöllisten kokemusten lisäksi pedagogiseen näkökulmaan, kuinka empatiaa voidaan oppia ja opettaa ja millaisia asioita siinä yhteydessä tulisi huomioida. Teksti yhdistää sosiaalipedagogisen lähestymistavan empatian oppimiseen ja opettamiseen.

Avainsanat: ammatillinen empatia, korkeakoulu, sosiaalipedagogiikka, luova oppiminen, oppimismenetelmät

ABSTRACT

■ Studies have shown that when clients experience empathy during their interactions with empowerment professionals, the results of the work are better (Gerdes & Segal 2011). Empathy has also been shown to reduce burnout and protect against secondary traumatic stress in professionals (Wagman, Geiger, Shockley & Segal 2014). This analysis examines and asks what an empowering professional is and what “qualified” empathy is all about? How can it be learned and taught effectively in higher education contexts? In this paper, we will describe how teaching and learning to use empathy has been a part of studies for Social Services students. We argue that professional empathy can be approached in multisensory ways when studying empathy (e.g. Austring & Sørensen 2006). In our case, we have used traditional learning and teaching methods alongside creative methods such as visual arts and drama as ways to learn and teach empathy. Social pedagogically speaking, professional empathy is not just seen as a ‘tool’ or ‘thinking framework’ in encountering clients, increasing empowerment, or supporting the process of inclusion, but it can also be seen as one of the core competencies for students (as future professionals). It also has an important role in their professional growth and activities. This paper presents results of the project called “Qualified Empathy” (2015–2017, NORDPLUS). The project took place in the Helsinki Metropolia University of Applied Sciences, as well as in Norway and Denmark as a way to develop diverse and creative teaching and learning methods to help Social Services students (N=47) to learn and develop more professional empathy skills as part of the course. As a part of this review, we have paid attention to individual descriptions as well as to pedagogical perspectives on how empathy can be learned and taught in higher education. We will also consider what needs to be addressed in the teaching and learning contexts in the future. The text combines a social pedagogical approach to the learning and teaching of empathy.

Keywords: *professional empathy, higher education, social pedagogy, creative learning, teaching methods*

Background

Professional empathy is often believed to occur as if by itself, unconsciously and intuitively as part of social services studies or social work practice. However, teaching often focuses only on the verbal, oral or written reflection, but experience and transmission (transfer) and the experiential dimension are missing. Work within the social services sector is largely interactive in terms of creating relationships and trust-based

(intervention) work. In order to improve work within the social sector, we need to support better interaction skills. In this case, the interaction and emotional skills as well as non-judgmental acceptance of others is of crucial importance. Studies have shown that clients who experienced empathy while working with professionals had better results and higher levels of effectiveness (Gerdes & Segal 2011). We define an empowering professional as someone who is able to use qualified empathy skills as discussed in this article in their work with their clients. Additionally, empathy has been found to offer some protection against burnout and to improve the balance of the professional's roles (Wagman, Geiger, Shockley & Segal 2014). Based on these findings, Wagman, Geiger, Shockley and Segal (2014) consider that the study of empathy is justified and it should be a core part of social services studies. There are many methods and ways to learn, develop, measure, and assess acquired empathy skills, such as self-evaluation scales (i.e. The Empathy Scale for Social Workers, ESSW) (King & Holosko 2011); outside classroom studies (i.e. in Service Learning projects, Engaged scholarship, see Trad 2013); movie review, or based on reflection (Briggs, Fox & Abell 2012); literature and poetry readings (Shapiro, Morrison & Boker 2004), learning communication/encountering skills (Winefield & Chur-Hansen 2000) or through creative methods (Austring & Sørensen 2006). Empathy and finding solutions to people's everyday challenges may be a key target and source of innovation in the future (Kiiski Kataja 2016).

The project of Qualified Empathy

The thoughts and experiences of empathy presented in this text are based on the NORPLUS University project ("Qualified Empathy" 2015–2017) in which the Helsinki Metropolia University of Applied Sciences and its partner universities (Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Trondheim, Norway and Zealand University College of Social Education Roskilde, Denmark) participated. During the project, new teaching and learning processes and methods were developed. The aim of the project was to figure out how empathy can be learned and taught, and what kind of pedagogical elements should be considered in its context.

The aim of the project has been to examine together the concept of qualified empathy (from both practical and theoretical perspectives) and to exchange best practices. We also wanted to concentrate on finding out how professional empathy could be taught in Social Pedagogical contexts,

how we could develop student and teacher exchanges, as well as to expand our partner networks. (NORDPLUS-project Qualified Empathy.)

Professional empathy

Empathy as a socio-emotional (social affective) phenomenon is based on interaction and relationship (Cunico, Sartori, Marognolli & Meneghini 2012). Empathy is an essential part of a functioning human relationship and shows as an ability to identify when the other person needs support (Thompson & Woods 2000, 160). Carl Rogers (1961, ref. Thompson & Woods 2000) said: "Empathy requires the emotional capability to commit to understanding another person's world, but it does not mean that we should *'take all the other's emotions as our own'*. Empathy recognizes a sense of equality." (Thompson & Woods 2000.) Additionally, from a neurological perspective, research has shown that our bodies respond to another person's emotions or actions, "as if" we feel a degree of that, as a result of mirror neurons (Decety & Jackson 2004; Iacoboni 2006 in Gerdes & Segal 2009). We have a drive to imitate from birth, and it never declines (Iacoboni 2008 in Gerdes & Segal 2009) but continues to develop as we gain speaking and language acquisition (Nadel 2002 and Eckerman & Didow 1996 in Gerdes & Segal 2009).

Decety and Moriguchi in Gerdes and Segal (2009) pointed out the four components of empathy as

1. Affective sharing or the experience of similar emotions between the self and another;
2. Self-awareness which recognizes that although there is temporary identification between the self and other, there is no confusion between the self and the other;
3. Mental flexibility or the ability to cognitively imagine another's situation "from the inside" and
4. Emotion regulation which utilizes regulatory process to modulate the subjective feelings associated with emotion.

According to Hepworth and Larsen (1990), a professional level of empathy requires practice and development of these skills through guided learning. Although life experience provides some basic empathy and readiness to use it, it is not enough on its own. Empathy is different from sympathy, in that sympathy involves feeling compassion or pity for

another while empathy involves the attempt to understand and share another person's feelings and experiences without judgement. In our project, we wanted to look at how we could teach students to move from the cognitive recognition of these four components of empathy (see above) to an experiential understanding by moving through the three phases of learning as discussed by Austring and Sørensen (2012).

The process of teaching and learning empathy

According to Austring and Sørensen (2012), there are three essential approaches, the *basic empirical learning* where we meet the world through our immediate experience with sensory perception and emotion as one; *aesthetic learning* which is representative and we meet the world through a mediating symbol such as art, drama or music; and *discursive learning* which is also representative, where we meet the world through language or discussion. The idea behind the qualified empathy project was to facilitate students in taking their learning from a cognitive and discursive level to an experiential understanding, "as if" they were the client, in order to develop better rapport and understanding of the client's "experiential" world. However, this requires that the students learn how to separate themselves to work in a professional and "qualified" manner; applying what they understand at the experiential level and moving from the "as if" experiential level to the "I know how you feel; but I am not you" level and then finally to the final stage of considering how to best offer assistance.

Qualified Empathy is the ability to reflectively and emotionally separate oneself from another and to understand the context; then in an intentional process, focus on understanding of the other person's viewpoint both cognitively and emotionally. The three phases of this are 1) we feel like us ..., 2) I feel like you ("as if") ... and 3) I know how you feel but I am not you. (Austring & Sørensen 2006.) As the students move from the second phase to the third phase they are able to work in an empathic manner, connecting and building relationships without becoming overwhelmed by emotion and susceptible to burnout.

Practical implementation in the Social Services Degree Programme in Metropolia

The Qualified Empathy project was implemented during two courses. The first was Individual and Community Counselling course (5 ECTS) during which they explored their initial ideas of empathy using theoretical literature

from Austring and Sørensen (2006, 2012), Gerdes and Segal (2009) as well as practical examples from Brene Brown's work on vulnerability (2013). Students explored the differences between sympathy and empathy using discursive learning and reflection on their own empirical learning through experience. Students practiced using empathy in a more skilled manner by sharing their own experiences and trying to "step into their partner's shoes" and then using storytelling and imagination to feel themselves "as if" they were the person in the story. Stories from the refugee migration in 2015 were shared against a background of 'ocean storm' sounds and students tried to imagine themselves in the situation of the traveler and then retold the story "as if" they were the immigrant fleeing persecution. This initial introduction prepared the way for the next level where the aesthetic component of learning was added.

The second course was Supporting Daily Lives through Social Pedagogical Work (15 ECTS) (and Supporting Life's Processes in Early Education) (Metropolia Degree Programme Curriculum 2016). The course included combined competence areas: English, diversity and promotion of equality, social pedagogical methods of working through visual arts and adapted physical activities. The visual arts, adapted physical activities and drama methods were the aesthetic methods used in our project implementation. Also located within the module was an international seminar for German exchange students of social services as part of an international exchange project. The study module was implemented with first year degree programme students of social services in three sequential years. Each year some changes in teachers and methods were visible. For example in 2016 Heli Aaltonen from the Norwegian partner university taught drama and presented the idea of entangled empathy to students.

At the beginning of the module, students were introduced to the idea of qualified empathy through aesthetic methods: visual arts and adapted physical activity. The goal was to develop a working definition for themselves as well as to identify the importance of the concept to their future work. This was supported by theoretical lectures from the viewpoint of multiculturalism and diversity. Developing a lived experience of the concept of qualified empathy through visual arts and adapted physical activities were the main areas for the exploration of the aesthetic learning of the concept. As aesthetic methods are particularly capable of expressing and interpreting emotions (Austring & Sørensen 2012), the students were given a series of versatile tasks through which

they could gain an experiential understanding of empathy. Core questions were 'How do I understand other person's experience' 'How do I feel, when I feel empathy?'; and later 'How do I refine the feeling of empathy to qualified empathy towards the other person and what does it mean?' For example, one of the tasks in visual arts was to examine the essence of empathy by spreading gouache paints with paint brushes on a large (100 x 120 cm) sheet of paper in small groups. The interactions through painting gave space to multisensory experiencing and bodily expression on the topic. Some groups decided not to communicate verbally while they were working. Giving meanings to different colors, brush movements and simultaneously mirroring other group members body gestures and reactions to own expression, gave help, when trying to describe and express their own understanding of feelings of empathy towards others and others' perspectives on the matter.

The qualified empathy learning process took place in a sixteen calendar week time frame and three areas of significance were found. The first one was the meeting with internship field supervisors at the midpoint of the semester. The supervisors were able to explain in a very concrete way how they saw empathy in their work places. The students and the supervisors actively discussed how empathy might evolve into qualified empathy. The second significant area was the three phases of Austing and Sørensen (2012) that gave a framework to the process: (1) we feel like us ..., 2) I feel like you ("as if") ... and 3) I know how you feel but I am not you... The first two phases were experienced and reached through a combination of aesthetic methods, actions and discussions during which theoretical reflection on the topic took place (aesthetic and discursive learning). The final phase of the qualified empathy process was only partially achieved as evidenced by student reflections such as, "I feel like you and I am aware that I am not at phase 3 yet". The third significant area in learning empathy was that during the process the students moved from defining the concept as "the skill of stepping into another's shoes" and were verbalizing it in more "qualified" terminology such as: "Qualified Empathy means more supportive than reactive actions to client situations", meaning that the worker isn't solely reacting according to own feelings but was rather reflecting on and developing their own feelings into actions that are supportive for the clients. Finally in the international seminar with the German visitors the students had to concretize their own learning due to the fact that they had to explain it to someone else. Their learning was

enriched by the German students who were actively questioning their findings without having similar kind of learning process on the concept concerned.

Conclusion

It has been found that students' assessment of their own level of empathy and their ability to encounter their clients changed their own perception of themselves (Saarinen 2012).

To sum up, empathy can be learned and taught. While empathy can be learned throughout the lifespan, the learning often occurs unconsciously. Students who are studying to work in the social and healthcare fields will need these skills daily, therefore, it is important during their studies to contemplate what empathy is and how to cultivate it. Additionally, looking at what significance empathy has for students in their future work and how it impacts the client's life are core questions for the practitioner. From a Social Pedagogical perspective, we might ask whether a practitioner can be a part of a customer's empowerment process if he or she is not in touch with his or her own emotional world or have knowledge of its relevance. An empathic worker is able to be a mirror to others and adjust their interactions without falling deeply into the other's emotional world, lacking separation, and risking burnout or secondary traumatic stress reaction. Empathy is a resource and a tool for empowerment for both the worker and the client. For these reasons, it would be important to pay more attention to these skills in social and healthcare studies.

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