

# **EMPATHY AND THE MEDIA: CAN WE REALLY KNOW PEOPLE FROM THE NEWS?**

***Jon Rose, Ph.D.***

*VA Palo Alto Health Care System and  
San Francisco State University*

***David J. McIntyre, B.A.***

*Pacific Graduate School of Psychology*

## **Preface**

Much of our interest in news media may arise from feeling a sense of relatedness to the people portrayed. The popularity of *People Magazine* attests to how much people want to know about and understand people who are in the news. Conveying an impression of human understanding helps to boost TV news ratings and helps to sell newspapers (Bagdikian, 1992). News media stories about crime, heroism, fame and infamy are more compelling to obtain when we imagine we know how those in the news must have felt when the event presented occurred,

but how accurate can such attempts at empathy be? Is it possible to empathize with someone we only know about through the news?

When we say that we empathize with someone, or that a client empathizes with someone, what do we mean? What does empathy mean, and under what circumstances can it reliably exist? Is personal contact a requirement for empathy, or can it exist based on a conversation, a narrative, or from a series of news stories?

It can be argued that empathy requires personal communication with reliable feedback, or some other access to the inner workings of the person being empathized with. Without such an interaction, what is achieved may be internally satisfying to the perceiver, but not an accurate reflection of the perceived, and therefore not empathy as understood by client-centered therapy.

## **Empathy**

The word empathy comes from the German word, *Einfühlung*, meaning “feeling into”, that describes the process of art appreciation by assigning a visceral feeling to a work of art – essentially projecting one’s own emotions onto the artwork (Bennett, 2001; Myers, 1999). Levenson and Reuf (1992) distinguish between empathy, described as knowing or feeling what another person is feeling, and sympathy, described as a compassionate response to another’s distress. This range of definitions echoes the sentiments of Reik (1948, as cited in Myers, 1999) who lamented that the term empathy was bandied about in such a manner as to make it devoid of meaning. If, however, we want to look at the utility of empathy in the context of client-centered therapy, it is helpful to narrow the definition. Rogers (1980) described empathy as being not a state, but rather a process – a process of becoming intimately aware of what the other person is feeling, or even barely feeling, moment-to-moment, without judgment. Rogers described part of this process as frequently checking in with the person to ensure that the perceiver’s perceptions are accurate, and then being guided by the responses received (Cohen, 1994). Raskin and Rogers (1989) listed empathy as one of the tenets of client-centered therapy, and described it as reflecting “an attitude of profound interest in the client’s world of meanings and feelings as the client is willing to share this world” (p 157). They described a key component in this process as a “willingness to be corrected” (p 171). Raskin and Rogers went on to describe this interaction as a dance, with the client leading and therapist following. This concept of the empathic process was echoed by Bohart (1988), who stated that in client-centered therapy, empathy represents an in-the-moment understanding of the client’s internal experience that is devoid of judgment. This lack of judgment was one of the distinctions that Bennett (2001) made between empathy and sympathy.

Unlike psychoanalytic psychotherapy where the purpose of empathy is to understand the client in order to formulate an intervention, in client-centered therapy the effect is to help the client deepen his experience of the moment (Bohart

1988; Raskins & Rogers, 1989; Rogers, 1980). Brodley (1992) clearly distinguished between the effect of communicated empathy focusing or deepening the client's experience and the therapist's goal to acceptantly understand.

Levenson and Reuf (1992) explored physiological correlates of perceived empathy. Comparing heart rates between listeners and speakers, they found that empathic accuracy was higher for negative affect when there was a greater physiological co-variance between the listener and the speaker. For positive affect, empathic accuracy increased when the listener exhibited lower cardiac arousal, regardless of how aroused or calm the speaker became. These findings were interpreted to mean that, at least for negative affect, empathy includes both knowing and actually feeling what another person is feeling.

### **Conditions Necessary for Empathy**

Empathy is not a "skill or a power," according to Myers (1999, p. 148), but rather something that is derived from the process of communication between client and therapist, echoing the sentiments of Rogers (1980). This concept of empathy as a process was supported by Marangoni, Garcia, Ickes, and Teng (1995) who created videotapes of simulated psychotherapy sessions with female subjects, on the theory that females would be more expressive and open. Students (perceivers) viewed the videotapes and were asked to describe the interview subjects' (targets) internal thoughts at the relevant moments. Marangoni et al. found that cross-target consistency was high ( $\alpha = .86$ ), indicating that empathic accuracy represented a stable individual difference in the perceivers. When this is combined with the finding that accuracy increased with exposure, Marangoni et al. noted that this implies that empathic accuracy is a skill that can be learned. They also found evidence that the characteristics of the target had an effect on empathic accuracy in their study. One target who was ambiguous was very difficult to interpret and almost impossible to interpret without feedback. Furthermore, Marangoni et al. found that the perceivers were unable to accurately judge their own empathic accuracy. In short, empathic accuracy increased with exposure to the subject and increased more quickly when feedback was provided.

This supports the idea that certain conditions need to be met in order to achieve a level of understanding of another individual that we can call "empathy." First, empathic accuracy increases with time. The less information that the perceiver has about the person he seeks to understand, the less likely that the interpretation will be correct. Second, empathic accuracy increases with feedback of internal processes. This was especially important when the person being interviewed was ambiguous or conflicted in her statements. Lastly (and possibly most importantly) if individuals are poor judges of their own empathic accuracy then, absent feedback

or some other access to the person's internal processes, they do not really know if their perception of the observed person's internal process is accurate or not.

If various modes of human communication are examined using these criteria for empathic understanding, it is then possible to develop a framework for determining where it is probable that empathic understanding can be achieved. It is also possible to determine where empathic understanding is possible, but the probability of accuracy is so low that the result should be termed something other than empathy. Empathic understanding is most probable in a face-to-face (or comparable) setting of some significant duration, where the perceiver has the opportunity to present the target (person she wants to understand) with the perceiver's conceptualization of the target's internal state, and then receive confirmatory or corrective feedback as to that interpretation. In this way the perceiver is able to work with the target in shaping the perceiver's understanding of the target's internal process until there is mutual agreement that a correct interpretation has been achieved. The less information that is available to the perceiver, the less confidence the perceiver should have in the accuracy of her interpretation. For example, a phone conversation would deny the perceiver of relevant information from the target's body language, and written communication (e.g., letters, e-mail, or chat rooms) would further deny the perceiver access to voice inflections. It should be noted that a lengthy face-to-face conversation does not guarantee empathic accuracy, as the target may lack sufficient openness or insight to communicate their internal state effectively, and/or the perceiver may lack empathic skills and/or the frame of reference necessary to understand the target (Cohen, 1994).

A different level of empathic accuracy can be achieved through works of literature or performing arts such novels, autobiographies, biographies, theater, etc. While the perceiver does not have the ability to interact with the target (say, the main character in a novel) the perceiver (in this case the reader), does have unfettered access to whatever internal processes of the main character that the author deems appropriate. For example, the author has the option of presenting the reader with not only the external façade that the main character presents to the other characters in the book, but also the main character's inner thoughts and emotions. The same can occur in theater, where the character pierces the fourth wall and speaks directly to the audience. It should be recognized, however, that these characters are not real people and therefore lack whatever complexity the author has chosen to omit, or is unable to convey. The same would hold true for subjects of biographies or autobiographies, as, while the presentation of the subject may be extensive, the information presented will likely be edited to conform to an image that the author wishes to present. The readers' empathic understanding of a character can even be confirmed by the author later in the work, or in interviews and commentaries about the work.

At the far end of the spectrum would be subjects of brief reports such as newscasts or newspaper articles. Especially in today's compressed media savvy environment, any information presented should be eyed warily in terms of being

used as a basis for accurate empathy. This is both because of the paucity of information available as well as interference from the media's agendas.

One example could be the reporting of any well-publicized crime. The prosecution and the victim will be painting a picture of a sympathetic victim and an odious perpetrator. The defense will be painting a picture of a sympathetic perpetrator and an odious victim, and/or judicial system, and/or society. Political, religious, and social groups will be making statements for or against any of the parties mentioned above as suits their own agenda, which may have little to do with the facts of the case or the people involved. Each news source may present information designed to lead the media consumer to believe that he understands what it was like to be a particular person in the news story. Feeling empathic, those consumers may be more inclined to act (vote, write, protest, etc.) in a way that supports the speaker. The news media will then ostensibly provide the public with objective presentations and/or interpretations of the information flowing from these disparate sources. Bagdikian (1992) would argue that, while in the past the media would have slanted the reporting to meet their own agenda, their focus now is to report in such a way as to maximize advertising revenue through increased readership – achieved through a combination of sensationalism and non-offensiveness. In this situation, while it is possible that a media consumer might have an accurate understanding of the internal condition of the person in the news (be it victim or perpetrator), the likelihood of it being accurate can be no greater than chance. The consumer has no access to the person, limited information on the person's statements let alone thoughts, and no opportunity for feedback to determine if her assessments are correct. The perceiver may have sympathy for the person, but the perceiver's perception of the target's internal processes are more likely to be more a product of projection than any real understanding of the person's internal reality. At this end of the spectrum, the perceiver may be experiencing something close to *Einfühlung*, a projection of the perceiver's own internal state onto the person, but they will not be experiencing empathy as it is understood in client-centered therapy.

## **Future Research and Implications**

The notion that empathic perceptions derived from news media presentations of people are inaccurate is a testable hypothesis. An article or series of articles could be selected about a public figure, the target. The target's internal state could then be ascertained either directly from an interview or autobiographical sources. The researcher would be matching the target's private thoughts and feelings with statements from the news accounts. For example, the article might describe a specific incident from which thoughts and feelings could be inferred, or the article might explicitly assign specific thoughts and emotions – e.g., “Jane Doe was saddened by...X.” The first level of inquiry would be to simply determine if the target feels he was accurately represented in the news coverage. The second stage

would be to have subjects (perceivers) read the news articles, and, where specified by the researcher, tell what they think the target was thinking and feeling. These assertions could then be matched to the target's previously stated thoughts and feelings, and the perceivers' accuracy could then be determined.

It is important, when discussing empathy, to understand how the word is defined, otherwise, as Reik (1948, as cited in Myers, 1999) feared, the word has no meaning. In client-centered therapy, the meaning is precise, albeit complex, referring to an intimate, moment-to-moment understanding of the target's deep internal experiences that is derived from the feedback-laden interaction between target and perceiver, and that is free from judgment (Rogers, 1980). When defined as such, empathy is a powerful tool that allows the client (target or perceived) to feel understood, that draws attention to and deepens the client's own understanding of their self, and can thereby be a mechanism of therapeutic change.

If empathy is understood to mean something different from this, or if the meaning of empathy is unclear, then what is labeled as empathy may be nothing more than the projections of the perceiver – having little or nothing to do with the internal state of the client or target. Therefore, when writing about empathy it is helpful to clearly operationalize the term and, if possible, to firmly embed it within a well-understood frame of reference. This serves the dual purposes of making the meaning of empathy as referred to in the text clear as well as making the text relevant to a larger body of work.

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