

Book Review

Regarding Empathy

Shelia Haugh and Tony Merry (Eds.)

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Soft Cover

Empathy is a feeling that most if not all therapists strive to have with their patients and clients. It seems a simple word on the surface, but it has been researched and contemplated in great depth by many psychotherapists, theorists, and researchers. In particular, Carl Rogers has raised the significance of empathy as one of the three core conditions to elicit personality change in therapy (e.g., Rogers, 1957). The book *Empathy* edited by Shelia Haugh and Tony Merry is one of the four volumes of *Rogers' Therapeutic Conditions: Evolution, Theory, and Practice*. This series of books came from Gill Wyatt's idea to publish a collection of edited papers on congruence and Pete Sander's idea to extend the collection to include all six conditions of therapeutic change by Carl Rogers. Like the other volumes, *Empathy* is a compilation of articles and essays that describe and analyze the definition and role of empathy from a historical perspective, how it is applied in practice, and its use in a wider context such as from an evolutionary or biological perspective. As a psychotherapist and a recent supervisor to psychotherapy trainees, this book seemed very applicable to my professional undertakings.

The goal of the series as stated by Gill Wyatt is that the reader would understand "that the spirit of this separation [of Roger's six conditions] is in the hope that the examination of the separate parts will facilitate a deeper exploration of the inter-relationship of the conditions and how they create a whole." Thus, reading only the *Empathy* volume by itself will not satisfactorily achieve this goal. However, Haugh and Merry suggest a simpler goal: that the readers "will be stimulated both intellectually and emotionally, and that their practice will be strengthened or at least challenged by" reading this book. Overall, the editors and the various authors who contributed to the book have met this latter goal.

Part I of the book included two chapters on the historical perspective of empathy. The first chapter provides a good historical summary of Roger's theoretical conceptualization of client-centered therapy. The format is interesting in that brief

excerpts of historical events and passages from clinical cases were listed in historical order. I noticed that I was making more effort connecting the passages and excerpts. On the other hand, this exercise was useful in making me read more actively. Chapter 2, however, does not fit in this section since it attempts to describe the nature of empathy in therapy interviews and to examine how certain concepts from client-centered therapy are expressed in the author's therapy behavior. It does not provide an historical perspective as suggested by the title of this section. In fact, it is unclear where this chapter should be placed. It is the only research chapter in the volume and the research was a descriptive study rather than an experimental study. Additional research papers or a literature review of studies about empathy would have provided me with a more comprehensive education about the past and current research about empathy and client-centered therapy. By itself, this chapter, although focused on empathic behaviors, is insufficient as a representation of the research that has been done on empathy.

Part II includes 12 chapters on the theory and practice of empathy. Some chapters are better than others at meeting the editors' goal of challenging the readers' conceptualization of empathy and its role in therapy. For instance the third chapter by Shlien provided a humorous but provocative "devil's advocate" perspective that challenges the traditional perspective of empathy and its importance in therapy. Some chapters fully describe the typical or traditional perspective of empathy by comparing it to other concepts (e.g., cognitive, social, perspective-taking or reflection) or by dissecting the concept of empathy into smaller parts. Furthermore, other chapters focus on the role that empathy plays in therapeutic change in various populations, from schizophrenics to those with cognitive disability. The last chapter in the section also provides a different use of empathy in the role of being a supervisor rather than a therapist. This chapter in particular was very useful to me. It has helped me become more mindful of how empathy plays an important role in supervision and how it impacts psychotherapy training of graduate students. All chapters strive to provide a unique perspective about empathy as a theory of therapeutic changes and its use in therapy. The chapters also challenged me to stretch the application of empathy in various contexts. However, a reoccurring problem is the degree of repetition of ideas and information between chapters. Because of its disjointedness as a whole, it was very difficult for me to read the chapters in succession.

Part III includes three chapters that examine the wider context of empathy and its link to Roger's other conditions. In particular, the first chapter "Embodies empathy" extends the definition of empathy to include understanding the client from a somatic or bodily level and not just from a cognitive or emotional level. The following chapter extends the definition and the importance of empathy from an evolutionary perspective—empathy promotes the survival and progress of humans as a species. Both chapters enabled me to expand the definition or the components of empathy. The final chapter "Empathy in context: The joining of the streams" is written by the editors. This chapter describes how empathy "links" with Roger's other five conditions. This is a very necessary and fitting chapter to end the volume. It does an adequate job fulfilling Wyatt's overall goal of facilitating "a deeper exploration of the inter-relationship of the [Roger's six] conditions."

Because this book is a collection of papers rather than a series of chapters that flow coherently from one chapter to the next, the book has a few inherent problems. Each “chapter” appears to be a “mini-book” which does not necessarily add or contribute to the other chapters. I had to put in the extra work to see relationships or theoretical differences between chapters. Because there is little or no communication between chapters, several points such as the historical definition of empathy has been tediously described numerous times.

In addition, I would have liked the editors to briefly describe all the chapters in the introduction of the volume so that I could have anticipated what to learn in each chapter and understand why the chapters are ordered the way they are. As it stands, I greatly struggled and had to make extra effort to understand the book as a whole. Unfortunately, this struggle distracted me from fully appreciating the content of each chapter. Thus, perhaps the book would be better utilized as a reference “journal” with articles about empathy that can be selectively read depending on the interest of the reader. Despite its disorganization, I do believe that the book does contain valuable and interesting theoretical and clinical/ therapeutic perspectives regarding empathy.

Reference

Rogers, C.R. (1957). The necessary and sufficient conditions of therapeutic change. *Journal of Consulting Psychology, 21*, 95-103.

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