

TRAINEE TRAIT EMPATHY, AGE, TRAINER FUNCTIONING, CLIENT AGE AND TRAINING TIME AS DISCRIMINATORS OF SUCCESSFUL EMPATHY TRAINING

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Abstract

The state-trait model (Spielberger, Gorsuch, & Lushene, 1969) was applied to empathy training. Empathy training was seen as resulting in a change in trainees' state empathy level. It was hypothesized that trainees' state empathy level would be a function of trait empathy level, age of trainee, trainee's perception of the trainer, age of client, order of presentation of measures, and training time. Sixty-two religious women who were non-professional counsellors were given either 6 or 12 hours of systematic empathy training. State empathy level was measured from a thirty-minute standard interview. From tape recordings of the *Helping Interview*, groups were formed on the basis of state empathy level and amount of training time. The data were analyzed by two-group and four-group discriminant analyses. Significant discriminating patterns were found for successful vs. unsuccessful trainees in both 12 and 6 hour training groups. Successful trainees were most easily differentiated and predicted on the basis of young age, high level of trait empathy, and high perception of the empathic functioning of the trainer. Implications for short-term training programs and for further research were discussed.

Résumé

L'entraînement systématique a été étudié à l'aide du modèle "state-trait" (Spielberger, Gorsuch, and Lushene, 1969). Un changement au niveau de l'état d'empathie (state) chez les aidants serait attribué à l'entraînement systématique. L'hypothèse à l'étude était que le niveau empathique des aidants est une fonction de leur "trait" empathique, l'âge de l'aidant, la perception de l'aidant vis-à-vis son superviseur, l'âge du client, l'ordre de présentation des mesures et la durée de l'entraînement. Soixante-deux religieuses, conseillères non-professionnelles ont reçu six ou douze heures de formation. Le niveau de l'état empathique fut mesuré à partir d'une entrevue standardisée de trente minutes. Le niveau d'état d'empathie et la durée de l'entraînement, tel que mesuré à partir des rubans de ces entrevues servirent de base pour regrouper les sujets. Les données furent analysées par deux analyses discriminantes: entre deux groupes et entre quatre groupes. Pour les deux durées d'entraînement (6 et 12 heures) la discrimination fut significative entre les aidants qui ont atteint le niveau trois versus ceux qui ne l'ont pas atteint. Les facteurs contribuant à la discrimination dans le groupe de six heures furent jeune âge, niveau élevé de "trait" empathie et la perception du superviseur comme étant très empathique. Les implications pour les programmes d'entraînement à court-terme et pour les recherches ultérieures furent discutées.

Clinical experience and research has shown that it is necessary for the counsellor or helper in a therapeutic relationship to communicate empathy to the client or helpee in order for therapeutic change to occur. Most counsellor training units include a program of training in empathic skills in order to increase the level of empathic functioning of the trainees. Since trainees of the future include non-professionals whose usefulness as therapeutic agents in the mental health field is cited as a progressively growing occurrence (Hobbs, 1964; Guerney, 1969; Sobey, 1970), early identification of individuals with potential for empathic and facilitative relationships appears to be a worthwhile area of investigation.

With regard to Carkhuff's program of systematic training in communication (Carkhuff, 1971), there exists research evidence which indicates that perceiving and communicating empathic understanding is a skill that can be taught (Carkhuff & Truax, 1965; Truax & Carkhuff, 1967; Kratochvil, 1969; Vander Kolk, 1971; Kalisch, 1971; Eicke, 1971; Aspy & Roebuck, 1974). The ability to differentiate between trainees who successfully attain facilitative levels of empathic functioning after short training periods and trainees who do not would be a valuable asset to directors of short-term training programs.

Trainees who are or are not successful in

attaining facilitative empathic responding after training may be discriminated by several potential discriminating variables. One such variable is empathy as a natural disposition or a trait. Buckheimer (1963), Haier (1974), and Hogan (1975) have suggested a distinction between empathy as a capacity or natural disposition of an individual, emphasizing an affective-feeling ability, and empathy as a trainable interpersonal interaction, emphasizing a cognitive-understanding skill. Trait empathy, can be viewed as that natural empathic disposition, that the trainee brings to the training situation. Carkhuff's program may be said to provide training in simulated or "state" empathy, an interpersonal skill that can be learned and sharpened with practice, thereby taking on a more cognitive emphasis.

In addition, what the trainer brings to the training has been shown to be influential as to what is learned and what is modeled (Aspy, 1973, 1975; Perry, 1975). Client perception of what occurs in the therapist-client relationship validly evaluates therapeutic progress for Horenstein, Houston, and Holmes (1973) and Hill and King (1976). Barrett-Lennard (1962) has postulated that the client-therapist relationship as perceived by the client, is related to the outcome of therapy. If one might substitute the terms client and therapist with those of trainee and trainer, inferences may be made regarding the trainee's perception of the trainer's level of functioning and its effects on the outcome of training in state empathy.

The amount of time spent in training would necessarily have some effect upon the trainees. Schroeder, Hill, Gormally, and Anthony (1973) have shown that trainees learn to write stylistically correct empathic responses after six hours of training. However, the amount of training needed before trainees can respond empathically in a measure of verbally communicated empathy is inconclusive. The effect of the duration of the training, too, upon the final communication of empathy might possibly be affected by the functioning of the trainee. In the other words, the amount of training in state empathy as a predictor of final communication of empathy to the client, might vary according to trait empathy.

Certain other variables might possibly be influential as to whether or not a trainee reaches a facilitative level of empathic functioning after training. These include 1) age of the trainee, 2) age of client, and 3) perceived empathy level of trainer.

The purpose of the present study was to discriminate between successful and unsuccessful trainees after systematic empathy training. Variables under investigation include 1) trait

empathy, 2) trainee's perception of trainer, 3) age of trainee, 4) age of client, and 5) training time (6 or 12 hours).

METHOD

Subjects

Sixty-two Roman Catholic nuns were randomly selected from a subject pool of 150 and agreed to participate in a study involving "Listening Skills." All were professional women with college or graduate school degrees and all were involved in service or oriented occupations such as teaching or nursing. Subjects ranged in age from 25 to 76 years, with a mean age of 47.2 and a standard deviation of 14.8 years.

Instruments

Comrey Personality Scales (Comrey, 1970): The empathy/egocentrism (Scale P), of the Comrey Personality Scales (CPS), was used to measure trait empathy. Individuals who scored high on this scale describe themselves as sympathetic, helpful, generous, unselfish, and interested in other people.

Barrett-Lennard Relationship Inventory: The Barrett-Lennard Relationship Inventory (RI) (1962) was used to measure trainees' perception of the trainer's level of empathic functioning.

Procedure

Administration of the CPS: The CPS was administered on two separate occasions to 150 members of the Sisters of St. Francis of Philadelphia who were attending community meetings. Following administration of the CPS subjects were informed that individuals would be randomly selected and asked to participate in a study involving training and listening skills. The training would require twelve hours of time from some, six hours of time from others over a period of two weeks.

Selection of sample: 62 subjects were randomly selected and assigned to one of six groups. Three groups received four three-hour training sessions (12 hours), and three groups received four one and one-half hour training sessions (6 hours).

*Training:*¹ Both the six-hour and twelve-hour groups received identical material and presentation of concepts during training. The twelve-hour groups received more practice time in each session. The same trainer trained all the groups.

Empathy training consisted of two elements: (1) discrimination training which is learning to understand the five different levels of Carkhuff's empathy scale (Carkhuff, 1969); (2)

1. Details regarding the training procedure may be obtained from D. Boulet, School of Psychology, University of Ottawa.

communication training which is the communication of empathy which is practiced (a) in response to taped helpee statements (written or verbal); and (b) in role-playing interactions.

Measurement of Dependent Variables: To ascertain the trainee's level of state empathy, a 30-minute interview with a randomly assigned volunteer helpee was used. The interview took place immediately following the final training session. The RI was administered to each trainee to measure their perceptions of the trainer. Half of the trainees were administered the RI before the interview and other half following the interview.

Rating procedure: The training of the judges to rate the excerpts followed the standard procedure as utilized by Boulet (1975).

In selecting the excerpts to be rated, excerpts including at a minimum a helpee-helper-helpee interaction were randomly selected from 2-minute segments of the first, middle, and final third of each interview. In those cases where a helpee-helper-helpee interaction did not occur, another excerpt meeting this requirement was randomly selected in that third of the interview.

The excerpts were coded and randomly presented to two judges for ratings. The interjudge reliability using the intraclass correlation coefficient (Ebel, 1951) was .96. The intrajudge reliability was .79 for judge 1 and .82 for judge 2.

RESULTS

Subjects were divided into successful and unsuccessful groups on the basis of state empathy level as rated on the Carkhuff scale. For this study the cut-off point used was 2.92 which approximated the minimal facilitative level suggested by Carkhuff. Table 1 presents the state empathy means and standard deviations of the groups used in the discriminant analyses.

Five discriminant analyses were computed to determine if the discriminating variables: trait empathy, age of trainee, perceived empathy level of functioning of trainer, age of client, and order of presentation of the RI and the standard interview, were able to discriminate between the groups. Table 2 presents the summary for the five discriminant function analyses.

The discriminant function analyses indicated that the successfully trained groups and the unsuccessfully trained groups could be differentiated significantly by the discriminating variables of trait empathy, age of trainee, perceived empathy level of functioning of trainer, and age of client. However, the discriminating variables were not able to differentiate between the six-hour and twelve-hour training groups.

In view of the ability of the discriminating variables to discriminate among the successful and

TABLE 1
State Empathy Means and Standard Deviations of the Groups used in the Discriminant Analyses

Group	n	M	SD
Unsuccessful	46	13.16*	2.89
Successful ^a	16	18.81	1.09
Unsuccessful 6-hr.	25	12.28*	3.25
Successful 6-hr.	7	19.29	1.29
Unsuccessful 12-hr.	21	14.21*	1.98
Successful 12-hr.	9	18.44	.81
6-hr. Training	32	13.81	4.14
12-hr. Training	30	15.48	2.61

Note: The reported means are based on the sum of the ratings of three tape segments rated by two raters.

^aThe cut-off level used to determine success in training was a summed rating of 17.5, or the equivalent of 2.92 on the Carkhuff empathy scale $\sqrt{17.5 \div 3 \text{ segments} \div 2 \text{ raters}} = 2.92$.

*Difference between means was significant at the .01 level.

TABLE 2
Summary of the Five Discriminant Function Analyses

Comparison	Function	Relative %	Wilks' Lambda	df	p
Unsuccessful/Successful	1	100	0.648	3	.001
Unsuccessful/Successful (6-hr. training)	1	100	0.570	4	.01
Unsuccessful/Successful (12-hr. training)	1	100	0.461	3	.0001
Unsuccessful/Successful (6- & 12-hr. training)	1	67.30	0.491	12	.0001
	2	25.75	0.774	6	.05
	3	6.96	0.944	2	ns
6-hr/12-hr. training	1	100	0.903	1	.02

unsuccessful groups, the relative importance of the discriminating variables was examined (Table 3). In the discriminant analysis using the entire sample the variable which best discriminated between the successfully trained and unsuccessfully trained groups was the age of trainee followed by trait empathy. With the group of subjects who were given six hours of training, the best discriminating variables were trait empathy followed by age of trainee. With the group of subjects who were given twelve hours of training, the successfully trained group were differentiated from the unsuccessfully trained group by age of trainee and perceived empathy level of functioning of trainer. With regard to the significant discriminant function in the four group analysis, the best discriminating variable was age of trainee.

TABLE 3

Components in the Training situation: Standardized Discriminant Function Coefficients for the Unsuccessful State Empathy-Successful State Empathy for Total Group, 6 hr. Group, 12 hr. Group, and 6 & 12 hr. Group Discriminations

Components	Suc.-Unsuc.	Suc.-Unsuc. 6 hr.	Suc.-Unsuc. 12 hr.	Suc.-Unsuc. 6 & 12
Trait	0.408	0.591	0.399	-0.366
Age of Trainee	-0.900	-0.537	-0.725	0.899
Perceived empathy level- of-functioning of trainer	-0.203	0.391	-0.571	0.297

NOTE: Missing scales were not statistically significant for inclusion in the stepwise discriminant analysis.

The last column presents coefficients from a four-group analysis; all other coefficients were from two-group analyses.

DISCUSSION

The results show that discrimination is possible between groups of trainees who successfully attain empathic functioning following training from groups of trainees who do not, on the basis of certain variables and variable patterns. Trainees who successfully reached facilitative levels of empathic functioning after training were significantly younger than those trainees who were unsuccessful in attaining empathy skills. After 6 hours of training, trainees who successfully reached facilitative levels of empathy functioning were both significantly younger and demonstrated significantly higher scores on the measure of trait empathy than those trainees unsuccessful after 6 hours of training. Trainees who successfully reached facilitative levels of empathic functioning after 6 hours of training scored significantly higher on a measure of their perceptions of the empathic functioning of the trainer than trainees who successfully reached facilitative levels of empathic functioning after 12 hours of training. After 12 hours of training in empathy skills, successfully functioning trainees were both significantly younger and scored significantly lower on a measure of their perception of the empathic functioning of the trainer, than those trainees who were unsuccessful after 12 hours of training.

In all discriminant analyses contrasting successful trainees with unsuccessful ones, age was a heavily weighted component. Age does tend to be associated with a variety of psychological and sociological factors, with new skills and new learning sets being more difficult for a person long established in certain behaviour patterns to achieve in a relatively short period of time. Scrutiny of the raw data indicates that while "not every young trainee achieved" a facilitative level

of empathic functioning, no trainee over 50 years of age reached facilitative empathy functioning as rated by the judges.

That trait empathy is somewhat influential in predicting state empathy is a valuable finding with regard to its theoretical significance, and a useful finding with respect to counsellor-training programs. That trait empathy alone is not enough to predict if a trainee will or will not reach facilitative levels of empathic functioning is evident from the appropriate discriminant functions, but its value as a predictor is also evident. In every analysis discriminating between high and low state empathy groups, trait empathy contributed to the resulting discriminant function. That in certain analyses trait empathy is more heavily weighted with discriminating power than in other analyses (particularly in that analysis discriminating between successful and unsuccessful trainees after 6 hours of training) could have important implications for short-term programs of training. Trainees not scoring high on measures of trait empathy were generally those trainees who did not reach facilitative empathic functioning after 6 hours of training in empathy skills, particularly if the trainee was over 50 years of age.

It was initially expected that the higher the level of empathy functioning of the trainer, as perceived by the trainee, the higher the level of the final communication of empathy to the "client" on the part of the trainee. Such an expectation, however, was not upheld in the discriminant analysis between all successful trainees and all unsuccessful trainees, nor between successful trainees after 12 hours of training and unsuccessful trainees after the same number of hours. Such was not the case, though in the discriminant analysis between successful trainees

after 6 hours of training and unsuccessful trainees after 6 hours training, where the component of perceived trainer empathy possessed a positive weight, and tended to be associated with membership in the successful empathy group in that analysis. This finding needs to be interpreted in light of the fact that for no group was the mean score significantly lower than that score cited by Barrett-Lennard (1962) as necessary for at least minimally facilitative functioning on a scale of empathic understanding rating the therapist as perceived by the client. With regard to classification and prediction results, both successful and unsuccessful trainees after 6 hours of training appeared more clearly defined and easier to classify on the basis of patterns of their scores on measures of identified variables than both successful and unsuccessful trainees after 12 hours of training, who had more poorly defined scores. That is, trainees with 6 hours of training had patterns of scores which unambiguously fit into a successful or unsuccessful group. Whereas, trainees with 12 hours of training had patterns of scores which made it difficult to place the subjects into a successful or unsuccessful group. It may be speculated that the influence of trait empathy and perception of the empathic functioning of the trainer on trainee state empathy decreases as training time increases.

The age of the client did not appear to contribute significantly as a discriminating variable. However, as was expected, the order of presentation of the RI measuring the perceived empathy level of the trainer, before or after the Helping Interview, did not effect the measure of state empathy.

Implications for trainers of empathic skills programs are that age, trait empathy, and the trainee's perception of the empathic level of functioning of the trainer are determinants of successful or unsuccessful training. These variables are especially predictive of successful or unsuccessful attainment of empathic functioning after 6 hours of training. Of value for further research would be the inclusion of a male population, in addition to studies aimed at measuring the effect of longer training periods on predictors of state empathy.

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