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“The Science of Caring: Empathy and Professional Education”

Abstract

Professional caring requires the ability to make an empathic connection with clients that does not result in enmeshment, overload or depletion of the caring impulse. Empathy is the ability to imagine oneself ‘in the shoes of the other’—an ability that derives from ‘having a good heart.’ Recent brain research suggests that brains may be hard-wired for empathy. New findings in brain science can have important implications for the education and training of caring professionals. Making empathy a priority in professional training will require definition of “requisite skills, knowledge, and attitudes... in curriculum development and assessment” (Selles, 2011). Matching brain capacity based on recent research to pedagogical tasks will allow for the development of empathic abilities that can be enhanced by creativity and imagination.

Definitions of empathy

Empathy has been defined as “the capacity to be affected by and share in the state of an other (or others) in such a way that we maintain self-awareness even as we “feel into” the other’s experience”(Hollingsworth, 2008). Training for or modulating empathy is an essential skill for caring professionals—yet such training challenges pedagogy by requiring experiential as well as theoretical knowing (Halpern, 2001). In *The Empathic Healer*, Bennett claims that empathy is a relational mode “in which one person comes to know the mental content of another, both affective and cognitive, at a particular moment in time and as a product of the relationship that exists between them” (Bennett, 2001). Such interpersonal knowledge is not only a product of individual ability, but relies on brain science to make a relational connection.

Although that interaction has seemed quite mysterious and unpredictable, research on human mirror mechanisms (MNS) suggest that such pathways enable individuals to understand the meaning of actions done by others, their intentions, and their emotions (Rizzolatti & Craighero, 2005). Studies of human behavior build on earlier research with macaques that led to evidence of shared representations enabled by F5 of the pre-motor cortex and the parietal area PF (Rizzolatti & Craighero, 2005).

Using functional magnetic resonance imaging (MRI), scientists have located two cortical areas associated with mirror properties that enable inter-subjectivity in humans in the pre-motor and inferior parietal regions of the brain. These MNS are associated with higher-level functions including action representation and imitation that have implications for empathy, language, and self understanding (Iacoboni, 2009). Recent work on mirror neurons challenges widely held beliefs that saw

human behavior as motivated by self-serving individualism (666). Brain research supports the notion of sophisticated neural circuits that facilitate an ability to empathize at an unconscious and automatic level. Educators are now challenged to identify aspects of empathy that are essential competencies for students and to integrate brain science with educational strategies that will enhance professional caring in situations ranging from the familiar to the complete unknown.

Application to higher education

Empathy is increasingly identified as an essential component rather than an accidental byproduct of higher education. Empathy is a broad concept that has been associated with the ability to understand differences derived from culture, education, experience, gender, religion, economic status, illness, and health. Understanding difference relies on reflective capacities that are increasingly used in professional education including narrativity (Charon, 2002), reflective writing, service learning, and small group interaction in an attempt to improve the learners' ability to imagine the experience of another and to graduate empathic practitioners (Andersen, 2009; LaRocco, 2010; Maxwell, 2010; Negi, 2010).

Skills of interpretation, imitation, and prediction happen in through the MNS and can become part of the toolkit of the observer. Research on music education and MNS, for example, reveals that singing together or listening to music can communicate social and affective information resulting in a feeling of shared purpose and being together (Overy & Molnar-Szakacs, 2009). Research on the effects of shared experience, reflective space, and enhancement of creative and imaginative abilities needs to be paired with the emerging brain science.

Can the practice of teaching and learning for empathy be enhanced the latest findings of neuroscience? Providing learning opportunities that allow for imitation, interpretation and prediction that engage the MNS may require more than adjustments in curricular content. Collaborative models of learning may support the inherent relationality of neurobiological processing more than competitive models. A learning community that supports empathic development and compassion (Hollingsworth, 2008) will require attention to curriculum content, instructional methods, and the learning culture as a whole.

Educators can begin by defining the components of professional empathy in order to determine how these competencies can be learned, taught or experienced in ways that integrate brain science. Ruth Gordon's work with children provides exciting models of educating for empathy (2005). Extending those models to higher education and professional training will be the next challenge.

Inserting empathy into the learning culture and curriculum of professional education requires more than lip-service to a concept of empathy that might be falsely limited to personality based notions of agree-ability or sociability. Such learning moments may include imitation, synchronization and shared experience as well as individualized learning, reflection, and the development of appropriate self-

awareness that allows the evaluation of the other-perspective (Decety & Jackson, 2004). Such skills are essential not only for empathic attunement, but also for engagement in pro-social behavior, civic engagement, and working for justice.

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