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A Study of the Relationship Between Life Events and Empathy

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A STUDY OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN

LIFE EVENTS AND EMPATHY
(TITLE)

BY

Catherine Ferme

THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF

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IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY
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ABSTRACT

The study investigated the relationship between the occurrence of stressful events in people's lives and their empathy for other people. Subjects were 74 graduate and undergraduate psychology students at Eastern Illinois University. The subects viewed videotapes of persons describing stressful events such as academic problems, death of a relative or friend, divorce, et cetera. The subjects rated themselves on their empathy for each person. They then completed a questionnaire based on Holmes and Rahe's Social Readjustment Rating Scale. Subjects' empathy scores and life event scores were analyzed using Pearson r correlations. Results of the study confirmed the hypothesis that experienced life stress is significantly related to empathic responding. The hypothesis that there is a significant relationship between the recency, severity and degree of resolution of stressful events and empathic responding was also confirmed The results did not support the hypothesis that specific empathy scores would be positively correlated with the occurrence of specific life events.

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Acknowledgements

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Little research has been done on the relationship between life crisis events and the development of empathy for others who are in crisis. The concept of empathy itself has been extensively studied as well as the process by which it is learned. The term "empathy", from the Greek "em" plus "pathos", has been in common use for some time. One of the earliest systematic applications of empathy is attributed to Carl Rogers. (1959, p. 210) He defined empathy as, "to perceive the internal frame of reference of another, with accuracy and with the emotional components and meanings which pertain thereto, as if one were the other person, but without ever losing the "as if" condition." Clark (1980, p. 188) defines empathy similarly, as "the unique capacity of the human being to feel the experiences, needs, aspirations, frustrations, sorrows, joys, anxieties, hurt or hunger of others as if they were his or her own." Much research has concentrated on the area of training people to be empathic to others. Numerous methods for teaching empathic skills have been devised. Most often, a combination of didactic and experiential methods are used. Didactic models emphasize giving information about empathy and teaching techniques for responding empathically to others. Experiential models stress the empathic person's need to become aware of his or her own feelings and to learn from his or her own experience. In didactic methods, subjects typically are trained using discussion of empathic skills, video and audio tapes or programmed instruction (e.g. Saltmarsh,

1973). Experiential models of empathy training typically focus on modeling the behavior of a facilitator and practice through roleplaying. Roleplaying has been used in empathy training for such diverse groups as employment counselors (Housely and Magnus, 1974), child welfare workers (Gelfand, et. al., 1973), high school students (Haynes and Avery, 1979), parents of emotionally disturbed children (Carkhuff and Bierman, 1970, and psychiatric inpatients (Pierce and Drasgow, 1969). Roleplaying is used as an analogue to real problem situations and participants are often encouraged to roleplay problems which they have experienced in the past (Wells, 1976).

One of the most important applications of emphatic skills has been in the area of crisis intervention. Caplan (1964) defines a crisis as an upset in the normal steady state, or homeostasis, of the individual. Either physiological or phychological stress can threaten this balance, throwing the person into a state of crisis. Parad (1966) adds to Caplan's definition by saying that a crisis is characterized by 1) a specific and identifiable stressful event 2) the perception of that event as meaningful and threatening 3) the response to the event and 4) the coping tasks involved in successful adaption. Crises end when some type of equilibrium is restored. This equilibrium may be equal to, lower or higher than the previous level of functioning. This can include a greater capacity for empathy.

Many studies have been done on the relationship between stressful life events and physiological and psychological func-

tioning. Most notable has been Holmes and Rahe's work on life stress and illness onset. Holmes and Rahe's (1967) Social Readjustment Rating Scale weights 43 common events that are likely to cause stress and produces an estimate of the probability of future illness. Included are changes in family relationships, marriage, occupation, economics, peer relationships, education, religion, recreation and health. The emphasis is on change from the existing steady state and not on psychological meaning, emotion or social desirability. The Social Readjustment Rating Scale and similar techniques have been used to study stress factors in problems such as coronary disease (Fisher, et.al., 1962), child abuse (Egeland, et.al., 1980), schizophrenia (Rabkin, 1980), and suicidal behavior (McQuade, 1978) and cross-cultural studies of life stress (Masuda and Holmes, 1967; Komoroff, et.al., 1968).

Although much research has explored the concept of empathy and its effect on the theraputic process, there has been little empirical research focused on the possibility that theraputic outcome may be enhanced when the therapist has experienced a problem similar to that of the client. Some psychoanalytic theorists support the view that the therapist who has had personal problems will be more emphatic towards others. According to Kaplowitz (1967, p. 115) "The psychotherapist who experiences personal anxiety, depression, or any other painful emotional symptom will have a greater ability to empathize with his (or her) patient's suffering." This is consistent with

the common view of client-centered theorists that the coun-
selor's personal experiences are important to his or her em-
pathy for others. With this in mind, agencies such as univer-
sity counseling centers frequently establish peer counseling
programs. Support and self-help groups such as Alcoholics
Anonymous and Recovery are based on the assumption that per-
sons who have experienced a particular crisis are especially
effective in helping others with the same problem. Little con-
trolled outcome research has been done with these groups. Much
of the research has been confined to the formal client-thera-
pist dyad. Neher and Dicken (1975) studied empathy among college
students who had experienced problems with grades. Client state-
ments concerning worry about grades were excerpted from record-
ings of two counseling sessions with a nineteen year old female
college student. The subjects were instructed to respond to
each statement as if they were counselors and their responses
were recorded. After responding to the client, the subjects
answered a questionnaire about their own experience with simi-
lar problems. Subjects' responses were rated on Truax's Accu-
rate Empathy Scale (1961), a nine-point scale that measures
levels of empathy. The subjects' present grade averages were
used as an estimate of the degree to which grades had been a
problem for them. Subjects who had had academic problems in
the past were expected to be more empathic than those who had
not had trouble with grades. Empathy scores for grade problem
statements were significantly related to low grade point average.

Neher and Dicken (1975) recommended further investigation of the possibility that persons who have experienced "important personal difficulties" are more empathic toward persons who are experienc;ing similar problems, using a wider range of problem situations.

In view of these recommendation and the lack of previous research in this area, the following major hypothesis is proposed:

1) A significant relationship exists between stressful life events and empathic responding, as measured by self-report measures.

There has been no research on the effect of the recency, severity, or degree of resolution of life stress on empathic behavior. The following hypothesis is generated to focus on these issues:

2) A significant relationship exists between recency and severity of stressful events and empathic responding, and between degree of resolution of life events and empathic responding, as measured by self-report measures.

This study is also designed, in part, to investigate the relationship between the specificity of life events and empathic understanding. The following hypothesis addresses this issue:

3) Subjects' empathy scores will be positively correlated with the occurrence of specific events in their own lives.

Method

Subjects: A total of 74 subjects in undergraduate and graduate psychology classes participated in the study.

Research Design: A design of this study is correlational. A life events score, a recency score, a severity score, a resolution score and an empathy score were obtained from each subject. Product-moment correlations (Pearson) were used to analyze the data.

Procedure: Subjects viewed videotapes of 10 actors, 5 males and 5 females, who took the roles of persons in crisis. Seven stressful situations considered common in a college population were selected from Holmes and Rahe's Social Readjustment Rating Scale and adapted for college students. After each segment of tape, subjects were asked to rate themselves on their degree of empathy for the person in crisis. A five-point Likert Scale was used. Subjects then completed a life events questionnaire which incorporated the seven crisis events. Events selected for this study were: interpersonal relationship problem, academic problem, health problem, death of a close relative or friend, divorce, job problem and emotional problem.

Results

The Pearson product-moment coefficient of correlation was computed for scores on the College Student Life Events Questionnaire and the empathy questionnaire. The correlation between

the number of life events experienced and the total empathy scores was significant (r=.318, p=.01) (see Table 1). Life event scores were then divided into high vs. low event scores on the basis of a median split. Correlation coefficients were computed, using the "high life events" subjects, between recency scores and empathy scores, between severity scores and empathy scores and between resolution scores and empathy scores. The correlation between recency of events and empathy was significant (r=.275, p=.05) (see Table 2). The correlation between severity of events and empathy scores was also significant (r=.289, p=.03). The correlation between degree of resolution of life events and empathy scores was significant as well and are presented in Table 2 (r=.353, p=.01). T-tests of the relationship between empathy scores for specific problems and the occurrence of those specific life events were non-significant for all seven events (see Table 3).

The mean number of life events for all subjects was 2 out of a possible 7 events. The mean empathy score was 31.4 out of a possible 50, with a standard deviation of 6.2.

TABLE 1

MEANS, STANDARD DEVIATIONS AND PEARSON CORRELATION FOR LIFE
EVENTS SCORES AND EMPATHY SCORES

Variable	Cases	Mean	Standard Deviation
Life Events	74	2.9	1.39
Empathy	74	31.4	6.24

Variables Life Events	Cases	Correlation	Significance
Life Events/ Empathy	74	.318	p=.003

TABLE 2

PEARSON PRODUCT-MOMENT CORRELATIONS FOR EMPATHY SCORES AND
RECENCY, SEVERITY AND RESOLUTION SCORES OF LIFE EVENTS

Variable	Correlation	Significance
Recency	.257	p=.05
Severity	.289	p=.03
Resolution	.353	p=.01

TABLE 3

T-TESTS - COMPARISONS BETWEEN SPECIFIC LIFE EVENT SCORES AND
SPECIFIC EMPATHY SCORES, USING "HIGH EVENTS" GROUP

Life Event Groups

	non-experienced				experienced		
LE	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	T-value*
Academic	16	3.31	1.07	28	2.96	1.37	.87
Death	3	3.33	0.58	41	3.68	1.25	-.48
Illness	34	2.26	0.99	10	2.60	0.70	-.99
Job	25	3.48	1.33	19	3.21	1.13	.71
Emotional	28	3.43	1.07	16	4.00	1.15	-1.66
Interpersonal (male roleplayer)	11	3.73	1.42	33	3.64	1.08	.22
Interpersonal (female roleplayer)	11	3.54	1.44	33	3.76	0.94	-.57
Divorce (male roleplayer)	25	3.12	0.88	19	2.95	1.27	.53
Divorce (female roleplayer)	25	3.28	0.94	19	3.21	1.23	.21

* for 42 df, $p < .05$

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Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate the relationship between stressful life events and empathy for others. A significant correlation was found between the number of life events experienced by the subjects and their estimate of their empathy for others who were experiencing stress. This lends support to the hypothesis that persons who have experienced a high number of stressful life events will be generally more empathic than those who have experienced fewer of these events. The relationship between experienced life stress and empathy confirms the value of the experiential approach to empathy training. Since experiential models encourage counselors-in-training to draw on their own experiences, those who have been through a number of stressful events would then be likely to learn the skills of empathic responding more easily. Didactic methods of empathy training would also be expected to be more effective with those who have experienced more life events, since such persons would be able to relate the instruction to their own experience. The correlation between life events and empathy also supports Wells' (1976) view that participants in roleplaying exercises should be encouraged to use problems which they have actually experienced.

Results of this study corroborate Kaplowitz (1967) in his statement that therapists who have had emotional problems themselves will be more able to empathize with their clients. The assumption behind peer counseling and self-help programs,

i.e. that persons who have had problems themselves can be effective helpers with those who are experiencing difficulties, is also supported by these findings. The results also help to corroborate the research of Neher and Dicken (1975) in their investigation of college students' empathy for academic problems. The current study also found that college students could empathize with a wide range of human experience. In addition, the life events - empathy relationship was demonatrated in a wider range of problems.

The relationship between empathy and the recency, severity and degree of resolution of life events was also significant. Thus, the greater the impact of the events, the more a person is able to empathize with others. This suggests that empathic persons may be those who have experienced some severe stress in their lives. Persons who have only been through relatively mild stress might not be as able to identify as easily with others' problems. The relationship between empathy and the recency of life events suggests that persons whose crises are more recent are apt to be more empathic than those for whom the stress is further removed from present awareness. This implies that persons can increase their empathic skills by remaining "in touch" with their past experiences. Resolution of the life stress also seems to have bearing on the capacity for empathy. Persons who have experienced stressful events and have come to some level of resolution tend to be more empathic than those who are still struggling with such crises themselves.

Thus, the close proximity of the event might prevent the individual from empathizing. Resolution of life stress, then, may be helpful in the development of empathic understanding.

The relationship between the experience of specific life events and empathy for the same situations was not significant. Although life stress tends to increase general empathy, a person need not have had the same experiences in order to be able to empathize with someone else. For example, it may not be necessary for a person to have been divorced to be able to understand a divorced person's feelings. This may be particularly significant in certain areas such as alcoholism treatment where it is believed that recovering alcoholics may be more effective counselors due to the specific similarity of their experience with those people with whom they are working (Blane, 1977).

The low correlation coefficients obtained in this study raise questions about the practical significance of the correlations. Limitations of this study which could have affected the correlational data include the small size and homgeneity of the sample. The low incidence of some of the life events (e.g. serious physical illness and job difficulties) and the subjectivity inherent in self-report measures may also have limited the findings.

In general, results of this study suggest that people can be encouraged to draw on their own experiences in helping other people. Although empathy can be learned, it can also be enhanced through persons' sensitivity to their own life stresses.

There may also be implications from this study for the selection and training of professional helpers, since empathic helpers may be those who are sensitive to their own past experiences.

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APPENDIX A

College Student Life Events Questionnaire

1. A. Have you ever had severe relationship problems with a member of the opposite sex?_____

    past six months_____

    past one year_____

    past five years_____

    longer than five years___

   C. How much did this interfere with your life at the time?

    very much_____

    moderately_____

    a little_____

    not at all_____

   D. How completely has this situation been resolved?

    completely resolved_____

    almost resolved_____

    somewhat resolved_____

    not at all resolved_____

   Comments:_____

2. E. Have you ever had academic problems?_____

   F. If so, how long ago did this happen?

    past six months_____

    past one year_____

    past five years_____

    longer than five years___

G. How much did this interfere with your life at the time?

                                very much_____

                                moderately_____

                                a little_____

                                not at all_____

H. How completely has this situation been resolved?

                                completely resolved_____

                                almost resolved_____

                                somewhat resolved_____

                                not at all resolved_____

Comments:_____

3. I. Have you ever had serious health problems?_____

   J. If so, how long ago did this happen?

                                past six months_____

                                past one year_____

                                past five years_____

                                longer than five years____

   K. How much did this interfere with your life at the time?

                                very much_____

                                moderately_____

                                a little_____

                                not at all_____

L. How completely has this situation been resolved?

completely resolved_____

almost resolved_____

somewhat resolved_____

not at all resolved_____

Comments:_____

4. M. Have you ever experienced the death of a close relative or friend?_____

past six months_____

past one year_____

past five years_____

longer than five years___

O. How much did this interfere with your life at the time?

very much_____

moderately_____

a little_____

not at all_____

P. How completely has this situation been resolved?

completely resolved_____

almost resolved_____

somewhat resolved_____

not at all resolved_____

Comments:_____

5. Q. Have you or your parents ever been divorced?_____
separated?_____

R. If so, how long ago did this happen?

past six months_____

past one year_____

past five years_____

longer than five years____

S. How much did this interfere with your life at the time?

very much_____

moderately_____

a little_____

not at all_____

T. How completely has this situation been resolved?

completely resolved_____

almost resolved_____

somewhat resolved_____

not at all resolved_____

Comments:_____

6. U. Have you ever had problems with your job?_____

V. If so, how long ago did this happen?

past six months_____

past one year_____

past five years_____

longer than five years____

W. How much did this interfere with your life at the time?

very much_____

moderately_____

a little_____

not at all_____

X. How completely has this situation been resolved?

completely resolved_____

almost resolved_____

somewhat resolved_____

not at all resolved_____

Comments:_____

7. Y. Have you ever had serious emotional problems?_____

Z. If so, how long ago did this happen?

past six months_____

past one year_____

past five years_____

longer than five years___

AA. How much did this interfere with your life at the time?

very much_____

moderately_____

a little_____

not at all_____

BB. How completely has this situation been resolved?

completely resolved_____

almost resolved_____

somewhat resolved_____

not at all resolved_____

Comments:_____

APPENDIX B

S.S. #_____

These scales refer to the problem situations you have observed on the videotape. Please circle the number that best corresponds to your empathy for each problem, where 1 = lowest and 5 = highest level of empathy.

Situation 1

---

    1   2   3   4   5

Situation 2

---

    1   2   3   4   5

Situation 3

---

    1   2   3   4   5

Situation 4

---

    1   2   3   4   5

Situation 5

---

    1   2   3   4   5

Situation 6

---

    1   2   3   4   5

Situation 7

	1	2	3	4	5

Situation 8

	1	2	3	4	5

Situation 9

	1	2	3	4	5

Situation 10

	1	2	3	4	5