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Practicing Safe Empathy

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The capacity of a researcher to respond to the stories of his/her subjects with authentic engagement and to empathize with their experiences and predicaments is essential to the integrity of a qualitative interview process, but over-empathizing can be hazardous. As Charles Figley writes: "Empathy is a key factor in the induction of traumatic material from primary to secondary 'victim'. Thus, the process of empathizing with a traumatized person helps us understand that person's experience of being traumatized, but in the process we may be traumatized as well." [in Stamm p.20]

It is therefore important to understand and manage your empathic engagement with research subjects. We do not recommend that you strive to be un-empathetic, but rather to deploy empathy with care and thought.

What is empathy?

When we empathize we 'feel our way' into another person's experience using multiple pathways:

- Conscious/intellectual - asking for and receiving information
- Imaginative - instinctively drawing on and extrapolating from our own experiences
- Unconscious/somatic

Unconscious empathy results from mirroring the posture, facial expressions, physical movements, voice rhythms, breathing patterns and even heart rates of those to whom we attune in this way. The result is that some of their brain state is mirrored or stimulated in our own brain. We might pick up emotions but also physical symptoms and sensations.

If the subject's sympathetic nervous system (SNS) is activated, the researcher's SNS is activated too. If the subject has experienced terror, panic, powerlessness, hopelessness, the researcher can 'catch' those feelings and experience them at the level of SNS changes.

Role of mirror neurons

The 1994 discovery of mirror neurons helps us to understand how this happens. Italian researchers discovered by accident that when a monkey watched an experimenter pick up a

banana, the monkey's brain cells were firing at the exact location where the monkey's motor command neurons were located, even though the monkey wasn't moving.

Daniel Goleman [2007] has compared mirror neurons to 'neural WiFi'--the means by which we pick up another person's emotional state, physical state and intentions. According to Goleman, this 'puts us on the same wavelength and it does it automatically, instantaneously and unconsciously.'

How to deploy empathy safely: 4 suggestions

1. Use goals to direct empathy

Remember that as a researcher your role is to arrive at a contextualised understanding. Avoid imaginatively 'falling into' your subject's experience or visualising it as if it were happening to you (which can lead to distress, paralysis and the need to get away from the feelings). Instead follow Laurie Pearlman's advice to focus on 'what it was like for *this* person, *these* people, *this* community, and also ... on how they survived, on their strengths and resources'. Strive always to maintain a sense of your separateness and distinct identity.

Recent neuroscience validates this approach. Work on the neural basis of empathy [Zaki and Ochsner] suggests that there are two distinct sub-processes: an emotional Experience Sharing System (ESS) which enables you to learn about someone's feelings by feeling them yourself; and and a Mental State Attribution System (MSAS) which uses available information about context to discern what the individual is likely to be feeling. We now know that the neural system activated depends on the specific perceiver goals: the ESS is engaged when perceivers attend to how a target is expressing an emotion, whereas the MSAS is engaged by perceivers' attention to why the targets feel the emotions they are expressing.

2. Monitor your Sympathetic Nervous System (SNS) arousal

Be familiar with the signs of SNS arousal (elevated heart rate, dry mouth, cold extremities, feeling spacey or numb, not thinking clearly) and actively monitor your level of activation. If you are beginning to feel that your responses are getting away from you, or preventing you from being fully present and effective in your role, you will need to take steps to re-establish safety.

3. Use tactics for 'un-mirroring'

There are many practical steps you can take to 'un-mirror', and reduce the intensity of the empathic engagement, e.g.:

1. Consciously change your breathing so that it differs from your respondent's, ideally by making it slower and more purposeful. It might be helpful to look away while you take an especially deep breath accompanied by a shift in posture.

2. Notice whether you are mirroring the posture and movements of your client, and if so shift decisively to another position--e.g., leaning back if you have been sitting forward, uncrossing legs if they have been crossed.
3. Move your arms regularly to remind you that you have flexibility and freedom of movement.
4. Tense your arm muscles and/or sense the strength across your back.
5. Keep a glass of water nearby so you can take a drink when you feel caught in your subject's gaze and need to break away.
6. To break contact completely, excuse yourself to go to the toilet.
7. Remind yourself of the skin boundary between the inside and outside of you--e.g., by touching your own arm, or feeling the inside of your shoe with your toes--and resolve to maintain control of what 'comes in' through the boundary.

Thorough treatment of approaches to 'un-mirroring' can be found in the books of Babette Rothschild and Harold Brockman (references below).

4. Notice (and reverse) identification

When you identify with someone--see them as 'like you' in some fundamental respect, see their story or issues as though they were your own--you make yourself especially vulnerable to sharing their responses to trauma. You may need to remind yourself consciously and actively to move out of identification with that individual and feel your separateness.

Signs of identification can be obvious or subtle.

Practiced safely, empathy is actually a protective factor for vicarious trauma

In their study of how psychotherapists working with traumatized clients, Harrison and Westwood found that empathic engagement could actually be a protective factor against VT. Engaging empathically with subjects and conveying deep, genuine sympathy and understanding is often experienced by subjects as profoundly helpful and reparative, and in this way helps the researcher to have a sense that his or her efforts are valuable and meaningful. Also, the fact of establishing a human connection may reduce the sense of alienation that often accompanies trauma.

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