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## EMPATHY IN ADULT EDUCATION

### ABSTRACT

*Empathy is an important part of emotional intelligence and the latter is crucial for human relations, whether they be interpersonal relations, relations among people at work, or in a wider community. Therefore, empathy is important for adult education, for guidance counsellors, and for other adult educators. Adult educators must be empathic in order to understand the perspectives and needs of the participants in the educational process and empathy is a precondition for understanding. The development of empathy as a competence is a lifelong learning process. Namely, despite some biological predispositions for empathy, the latter can be learnt. It is the contention of the article that empathy is one of the most important intercultural competencies, because if a person is not empathic, other intercultural competencies very rarely cannot develop to their full extent. Thus empathy is a precondition for successful intercultural dialogue.*

**Keywords:** *empathy, emotional intelligence, adult education, intercultural competencies*

### EMPATIJA V IZOBRAŽEVANJU ODRASLIH – POVZETEK

*Empatija je pomemben del čustvene inteligence, slednja pa je ključnega pomena za človeške odnose, za medosebne odnose, odnose med ljudmi na delovnem mestu ali v širši skupnosti. Empatija je tako pomembna tudi za izobraževanje odraslih, za svetovalce in svetovalke, ki delujejo na tem področju, in druge izobraževalce in izobraževalke odraslih. Izobraževalci in izobraževalke odraslih morajo biti empatični, da lahko ugotovijo in razumejo perspektive in potrebe udeležencev in udeleženk v izobraževalnem procesu, empatija pa je prvi pogoj za razumevanje. Razvoj empatije kot kompetence je del vseživljenjskega učenja. Ne glede na to, da imamo ljudje nekatere biološke predispozicije za empatijo, se slednje lahko tudi naučimo. Članek temelji na podmeni, da je empatija ena izmed najpomembnejših medkulturnih kompetenc, brez katere človek pogosto ne more razviti drugih medkulturnih kompetenc. Empatija je tako prvi pogoj za medkulturni dialog.*

**Ključne besede:** *empatija, čustvena inteligenca, izobraževanje odraslih, medkulturne kompetence*

## INTRODUCTION

Empathy is an important part of emotional intelligence, which is important for all people, because humans are social beings who need each other for socialisation and survival. Baron-Cohen and Wheelwright write that “empathy allows us to interact effectively in the social world”, that it is “the glue of the social world, drawing us to help others and stopping us from hurting others” (2004, pp. 163). As such, it is especially important for those who work with people, for example, for medical doctors, social workers, anthropologists, therapists, politicians, and also teachers, including adult educators. Indeed, adult educators have to be empathic in order to understand the perspectives of participants in adult education. Guidance counsellors have to be empathic as well, in order to identify the educational needs of adults and to provide adequate advice to them.

In the article, I will focus on the following questions: What is empathy? What is the role of empathy in guidance counselling and in wider adult education? Why is empathy considered as one of the more important intercultural competencies? Additionally, some best practices of educational programmes which enhance empathy will be mentioned.

## WHAT IS EMPATHY?

If we are empathic, we try to understand other people’s feelings and thoughts. It means that we try to step into the shoes of the Other. Empathy can be defined as an emotional and cognitive response of an empathic person to an empathee and the construction of the perspective of the empathee. The word construction is used here to emphasize that an empathic person is limited in the identification of the other person’ feelings and thoughts by his or her own personality traits and socio-cultural experience, as well as by his or her historical, geographical background as well as biological predispositions. However, the learning of empathy is a lifelong process.

In order to grasp the feelings and thoughts of the Other, the length of the contact between an empathic person and an empathee is also important. The longer the contact, the greater the possibility that an empathic person constructs the perspective of the Other pursuant to the Other’s true feelings and thoughts. If we are in contact with the Other only for a short period of time, we can construct his or her perspective only through “the indicators of his or her external functioning” (Tomc, 1999).

## THE ORIGIN OF THE WORD EMPATHY

The word empathy originates in Ancient Greece (from 8th to 6th century BC until 600 AD). Empathy (*empathēia*) meant “in suffering” or “in passion”. Although at first the Greeks were not very sensitive to non-Greeks, because the latter were considered Barbarians to them, Alexander the Great (4th century BC) changed the attitude of Greeks to non-Greeks. He changed the landscape of diversity, and endeavoured to create a

united world. He also chose a Persian woman for his wife and many people followed him including Herodot (Calloway-Thomas, 2010). Herodot (484–425 C) was a founder of history and ethnology, who travelled around the world and described the everyday lives of people that he encountered. He tried to understand them, despite of the fact that he was later on accused of also writing some stereotypes.

In addition to the Ancient Greeks, all major religions such as Buddhism, Hinduism, Confucianism in China, monotheism in Israel, etc. emphasize the importance of empathy (Calloway-Thomas, 2010). The same holds true for the Christian religion. Calloway-Thomas (2010) further on emphasizes that from the 17th century on, they started to write more about empathy. In 1651, Thomas Hobbes wrote that humans are not only egocentric persons, but much more than that. In 1759, Adam Smith wrote that humans are capable of sympathy, which he perceived as we define empathy today. In the 19th century, John Stuart Mill stated that a human must make other people happy beside himself or herself. The concept of empathy as we use it today originates from the German concept *Einfühlung*, which was first used by Robert Vischer in 1873 in German aesthetics. The then concept emphasized the observer who projects himself or herself onto the object he or she observes. The concept was later on used in psychology by Lipps to denote the processes of getting to know the people. In 1909, Titchener used the English word empathy for the first time (Calloway-Thomas, 2010).

In the beginning of the 21st century, we can speak about the revived interest in empathy in various disciplines such as social work, psychology, philosophy, anthropology, history, education, neuroscience etc.

## A NEUROSCIENTIFIC APPROACH TOWARDS EMPATHY

Modern technology enables neuroscientists to identify the presence of empathy. They use functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) to observe the presence of empathy in the brain. Jackson, Brunet, Meltzoff and Decety (2006; Gerdes, Lietz and Segal, 2011) write that with that method the scientists can confirm that when we see the actions of another person, our bodies unconsciously and automatically respond as we were the actors and not only observers. Jacoboni (2008, in Gerdes et al., 2011) writes that the phenomenon is called mirroring – the brain circuit responsible for it is called the mirror neuron system. Gerdes et al. (2011) write that the automatic emotional and involuntary response triggered by the mirror neuron system is part of empathy – an emotional response. According to these authors, the emotional and cognitive dimensions of empathy can be empirically measured by the fMRI.

Indeed, in the first phase of empathy construction, we feel what the Other feels, and sometimes the sharing of emotions occurs, but we must differentiate between what we feel and what the Other feels. Then we construct the perspective of the Other with our cognitive abilities (Decety, 2007). If we want to be truly empathic, we also attempt to help the empathtee, if he or she is in distress. Krznaric (2014) summarises the

neuroscientific research and claims that 98% of people have the brain capacities for developing empathy, and that therefore, empathy can be learnt.

Primates and chimpanzees also have neuron mirror systems and are thus capable of empathy. Romero (2010) writes that chimpanzees console another chimpanzee, for example, if it was a victim of aggressive behaviour, however, they offer more consolation to those chimpanzees who are their relatives and who are close to them than to those chimpanzees who are not so close to them. The research shows that some other animals are capable of empathy, such as dolphins, cats, dogs, mice, ants, hens etc. (Edgar, Paul in Nicol, 2013; Hollis, 2013; Cozolino, 2006).

### **EMPATHY AND ADULT EDUCATION**

The role of emotions in adult education has often been overlooked. However, Palmén (2013) emphasizes that “learning is a holistic process, involving body and emotions, not just the intellect” (Palmén, 2013). Gouw, de Greef, Brand-Gruwel and Jarodzka (2014) claim that in order to hone reading skills of adults, a more diverse approach to adult literacy is needed, which would also include, among others, the role of emotions in the learning process. Frenzel and Stephens (2013, in Gouw et al., 2014) define emotions as “multidimensional constructs comprising affective, psychological, cognitive, expressive, and motivational components”.

Empathy is important for teachers as well. Muršak, Javrh and Kalin (2010) interviewed students of pedagogy and andragogy about what are, in their opinions, the characteristics of a high quality teacher. They discovered that the empathy competence is among the most desired competencies that a teacher must have. Similar results were characteristic for the answers of the participants in training to obtain a pedagogical-andragogical education (Muršak, Javrh and Kalin, 2010): empathy was considered one of the most desired competencies of teachers also by those participants.

Before developing adult educational programmes, an educational needs analysis in adult education must be done. In order to identify the needs of future participants, we must feel their feelings, listen to their thoughts, and construct their perspective, therefore, we must identify what they really need from their point of view, and at that point we can then develop an educational programme.

Listening is an important task for guidance counsellors in the process of adult education, too. If they listen actively, guidance counsellors can ensure that the voices of the participants are heard. Teachers and guidance counsellors must listen to whatever a participant says; they should not judge the latter (Hiller, 2005). According to the aforementioned theory on empathy, guidance counsellors do not identify with a client's feelings, but merely identify what a client feels and thinks, i.e. they construct a client's perspective, and a guidance counsellor should be able to communicate this perspective (see Hiller, 2005).

Actually, Ridley and Upidi (2002, in Launikari and Puukari, 2005, pp. 160) consider empathy “a core counselling quality”. “Ridley and Upidi (2002) list the following culture-general advice for showing empathy: respond to core themes (among others, put clients’ central messages into their own words), recover from misunderstandings (i.e. check our perceptions with the client), do not pretend to understand (i.e. ask for more information/further clarification), and use time in ways that reflect empathy (i.e. take time to think before you speak/respond to clients)” (in Launikari and Puukari, 2005, pp. 160). The same authors emphasize that a counsellor have to get rid of cultural biases, prejudices, and stereotypes. Ule (2004) writes that if we use stereotypes, we do not see a person as an individual, but rather attribute to him or her the characteristics of the group. It is therefore important for the guidance counsellor to be able to comprehend “a client’s life experiences” (Launikari, 2005, in Launikari and Puukari, 2005) and to see him or her as an individual with a unique life situation and experience. The same author claims that “a guidance counsellor is successful in showing empathy in intercultural communication when the client leaves the counselling session with the pleasant feeling of knowing that the counsellor has listened and understood her/him” (Launikari and Puukari, 2005, pp. 160). Puukari and Launikari (2005, pp. 27) emphasize that guidance counsellors and other professionals require intercultural competencies “in order to be better able to take into account (the) cultural diversity of their clients”.

## **EMPATHY AS THE MOST IMPORTANT INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE**

However, empathy is not only required in counselling, but also in intercultural contacts. Although we live in the 21st century, we still witness many conflicts in the world, including those in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, etc., therefore, intercultural dialogue must be enhanced globally. In order to do this, we must hone our intercultural competencies, which are a precondition for successful intercultural dialogue. Empathy is thus not sufficient for efficient intercultural dialogue, other intercultural competencies are needed as well. In addition to empathy, the following are the other intercultural competencies such as knowledge about the members of other cultural groups, respect for others and their opinions, negotiating values, awareness of one’s own cultural identity, tolerance towards ambiguous situations, interpersonal skills, flexibility, openness, etc. (Szekely, Van Eyken, Farcasiu, Raeymaeckers and Wagenhofer, 2005). However, there are some differences about intercultural competencies between cultures. For example, despite the fact that the anthropological research on empathy proves that in the cultures researched, it was discovered that people engage in empathic processes, although the word empathy does not exist in those cultures, it exists in combination with other similar terms such as compassion, love etc. (Hollan and Throop, 2011).

Indeed, it is the contention of the article that empathy is one of the most important intercultural competencies, because if a person is not empathic, other intercultural competencies vary rarely cannot develop to their full extent. For example, it is very often easier to respect a person if we are able to see him or her, to get to know who he or she truly is and

what he or she feels and thinks, because in this way we can understand a person. Thus, empathy is a precondition for understanding. If we could understand each other, we could improve human relations.

According to Bojan Žalec (2011), empathy is a necessary condition for dialogue; it is a link that connects critical thinking and dialogue, while prejudice remains an obstacle to dialogue. “The basic essence of human existence is its dialogic nature, to be human with a human” (Simonič, 2014, pp. 67). Žalec claims that “the formation of a dialogic person should be another central goal of modern education” (Žalec, 2011, pp. 7).

## **ENHANCING EMPATHY IN EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMMES**

Empathy can and should be enhanced in educational programmes as well. “It is not possible to imagine a good educational programme in which empathy would be neglected or even abandoned” (Stamos and Lunaček, 2012, pp. 299). The following are the examples of educational programmes, which could be considered good practices. The first example is related to school education, the other three are related to adult education. We need further research on the examples of good practices of educational programmes that enhance empathy in adult education, especially in Slovenia.

Mary Gordon<sup>1</sup> claims that it is difficult to teach empathy, but it can be developed through experiential learning, therefore she founded The Roots of Empathy Programme. The aim of the programme is to teach empathy to pupils. A teacher is a small child who visits a class occasionally (once in couple of weeks), a girl or a boy is “adopted” by pupils for a year. A child is accompanied together with a parent and a leader of the programme. Pupils gather around the child, for example, on the carpet, and they pose such questions as: What does a small child feel? Why is he or she crying? Why is he or she laughing? Pupils are trying to understand the child, they try to find out how does the child feel and think. After that, questions are posed, e.g. how does a handicapped child feel in a wheelchair, if pupils are laughing at him or her, how does a pupil feel if he or he is the victim of bullying in the playground (see also Krznaric, 2014a). The Roots of Empathy Programme started in Canada, however, it has already been implemented in several other countries, such as Scotland, the USA, Germany, Australia, New Zealand. More than 600,000 children have already participated in the programme.

In adult education, study circles are the example of the educational programmes that enhance empathy, where the latter is encouraged through experiential learning. Study circles represent a democratic form of adult education, which emerged in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries in the USA, Sweden, England and other European countries (Mijoč, 1993), including Slovenia. According to Urh, a study circle is a form of non-formal education for the group learning of adults, which is free of charge. It occurs in a non-hierarchical way and it is concluded with the common event (Urh, 2012). The basic principle of the implementation

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1 The Roots of Empathy Programme, <http://www.rootsofempathy.org> (11. September 2014)

of study circles in Slovenia is free choice (Bogataj, 2012), which includes the selection of topics on which the participants focus on. During the twenty years of the implementation of the study circles in Slovenia, two characteristics were discovered: the prevailing interest in ethnological topics, and the intergenerational structure of the participants.

Among the educational programmes for adults, the aim of which is to enhance empathy, the following best practice examples implemented by the organisation The Parents Circle – Families Forum (the PCFF) need to be particularly mentioned. This organisation was established in 1995, it consists of members of those who have lost a close family member as a result of the prolonged conflict between the Israelis and Palestinians. They implement many joint activities between these two groups of people, “which have shown that the reconciliation between individuals and nations is possible”.<sup>2</sup> Among those activities, the film *Two Sided Story* produced by Tor Ben Mayor has to be mentioned, which shows joint discussions of Israelis and Palestinians, both sides are communicating their own perspectives.<sup>3</sup> The Dialogue Meetings are an ongoing daily activity on the ground, which address Israeli and Palestinian students and adults. The latter are enabled to hear the personal narratives and the joint message from an Israeli and a Palestinian from the PCFF, which makes a good ground for the development of dialogue. At this organisation they also implement activities that target women and youth, the exhibitions are held as well.

Among the programmes that enhance empathy of adults, the William Pithers penitentiary in Vermont, the USA, developed the programme of the treatment of paedophiles in order to enhance their empathy towards the victims of their crimes. In the programme the testimonies of the victims are presented, later on the offenders have to describe the criminal act as it was, according to their point of view, experienced by the victim. In the end they have to simulate a criminal act in the role of a victim. In this way the staff of penitentiary encourages offenders to develop empathy to the victim. The research was done about the lives of paedophiles after the sentence, it was confirmed that those offenders who had participated in this programme, committed less crime after they were released in comparison with those who had not participated in the programme (Goleman, 1997). According to the same author, the programme is successful because it manages to teach some offenders empathy, although this goal has not been successfully achieved for all offenders.

## CONCLUSION

The origins of the word empathy could be traced to Ancient Greece. In the 21st century, there is a revival of interest in empathy from various scientific disciplines.

Empathy is an important part of emotional intelligence. It is the essence of being human, which binds people together. If we are empathic, we endeavour to identify and understand the feelings and thoughts of others. Empathy is important for everybody, because we are

2 The Parents Circle <http://www.theparentscircle.org/> (16. Februar 2015)

3 It is available on the above written web page.

all social beings. It is especially important for those professionals who work with people, including adult educators. In order for the adult educator to identify the educational needs of future participants in the educational programme, he or she must construct the perspective of the participants, therefore, he or she must be emphatic towards them. At first, he or she must listen to them: listening is a way to be empathic; it is a skill that is required in guidance counselling as well. Empathy is the most important intercultural competence. If it is not developed, very often other intercultural competencies can only develop to a certain extent. The development of empathy is a lifelong learning process.

Neuroscientific research confirms that 98% of people have the ability to develop empathy (Krznicar, 2014). It is most easily developed through experiential learning and educational programmes should aim to improve it, among other things.

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