Commentary on "Who's Challenging Who?: a co-produced approach for training staff in learning disability services about challenging behaviour"

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Abstract

Purpose
The purpose of this paper is to provide a commentary on the article by Flynn et al.

Design/methodology/approach
In this commentary, the authors will develop some further thoughts about the importance of empathy, its relational nature and place in practice. The authors use some examples from systemic practice to illustrate.

Findings
Social psychological research underlines the importance of empathy in practice. Systemic practice and other collaborative approaches that ask about the experiences and abilities of people with a learning disability and their networks can support new possibilities as network members are listened to, included and respected.

Originality/value
The relational nature of empathy and its connection with practice is explored in this paper.

Relational Empathy and Challenging Behaviour

'We only begin to attend in any meaningful sense of the word, to another's well-being when we acknowledge the reality of their internal experience. Such attention in turn elicits richer and more complete pictures of that internal reality. Just as the absence of empathy and absence of respect operate as cause and effect of one another in a vicious circle of exclusion; so does their presence, working in mirror image of the same dynamic, create the virtuous circle of inclusion'
(Murray, 2005: 40-41)

In this commentary, we develop some further thoughts about empathy, relationships and challenging behaviour. We use some examples from systemic practice to illustrate.

What is empathy?

Empathy has been described as *'the capacity to perceive, anticipate, and respond with care to the unique affective experiences of another individual'* (Decety and Batson 2007 cited in Echols and Correll: 2012: 55). One of the lessons from social psychological research (for an overview see Decety (2012)) concerns the moderating effect of perceived in and out groups on empathic understanding of individuals. The research is complex, though a take away message is that when we perceive an individual from what we consider an 'out-group' our empathic abilities may be less acute. We should rightly be concerned with this. Goodey (2015) in his work on inclusion phobia describes people with learning disabilities as the primary outgroup. A kind of out groups out group. For example, he notes that people with learning disabilities are excluded to such an extent that they are excluded from theories of exclusion (which are focused on other aspects of diversity).

We want to suggest that professional practice does (and should) address empathy and empathic concern. Some examples may be of use here.

I (Mark) work as a Systemic Psychotherapist with adults with learning disability and their relational networks. Sometimes a network may be dominated by blaming, hopeless conversations, the stories of people's lives may be deficit focused or problem saturated. Clinical language may dominate and connecting with the experience of the person is a struggle for supporters (and perhaps me). These kind of scenarios strain relationships and put a ceiling on useful collaborative working as empathy for the person and others in the network is squeezed out. I have used a number of practices in situations such as this such as network meetings (Fuchs & Ragoux, 2019; Baum & Steel, 2019) and internalized other interviewing (Haydon-Laurelut and Wilson, 2011).
Let's focus on internalized other interviewing (IOI). The interview has been used for increasing empathy (Burnham, 2000), supporting dialogue (Lysack, 2002) and has been described as a

way of entering the culture of a person (Pare, 2001). I have used this when the person is at 'narrative risk' and may be understood in limiting, narrow, and problem-saturated ways (Haydon-Laurelut & Wilson, 2011). IOI is essentially interviewing a person as if they were another. Another person, a feeling, another 'part' of themselves. There may be a specific focus such as the retelling of an episode of challenging behavior as if the staff member were the person with learning disability. The interview attempts to develop, deepen and broaden the person's understanding of the person and of the contexts of behaviours. In Murray's (2005:41) terms it is designed to encourage a 'virtuous circle of inclusion'. (See Haydon-Laurelut-Wilson, 2011 for detailed account of this kind of interviewing). Social psychological research (Coke, Batson, and McDavis 1978; Batson, Sager, et al. 1997 (Cited in Decety, 2012) supports this in showing that asking participants to take a person's perspective rather than to be 'objective' supports increased empathic concern. Another example of this 'empathy work' can be found in the work of clinical psychologists using an Attachment framework (Dallos, 2006). Using attachment ideas when working with those who support the person may create the basis for staff members to develop non-blaming, richer narratives through which to make sense of a person's behaviour. An attachment perspective may allow staff to develop their empathic concern as they contemplate this is how the person has learnt to survive (Stevens, 2019). A further systemic practice involves working with the person referred and a member(s) of the network. For example, this may take the form of I (Mark) interviewing the person with learning disability and a key network member(s) together about the skills and abilities of the person and their supporters. We may ask about times when Challenging Behaviour might have occurred and network members and the person 'teamed up' to mitigate this. Noticing this 'teaming up' may involve asking for details of safety creating perceptions (who first noticed Greg was becoming upset?), actions taken (Greg, how did you let Sarah know you needed help?), and connecting these to the person's life (How does this help?) The focus is on people with learning disabilities who may display challenging behaviour and their supporters making sense of (empathising with) each other's behaviour, the agency they have in relationship and what they might achieve together.

Working relationally, working with the network

At its root empathy is relational. When our work is informed by an understanding of the importance of relationships then our attention may be turned towards empathy for the person and those who are significant for the person. In doing so we will connect to the perspectives, stories, experiences, skills and abilities in a person's network, and the connections between them. An example of this in the context of reflective practice is outlined below.

Working Relationally: An example from reflective practice.

'As if' conversations (Anderson, 1997; Haydon-Laurelut et al 2012; Jones 2019) are conversations that may be used to enhance empathy in and for a network. They can be used with teams of professionals, staff or mixed groups as a reflective practice tool.

One or more people in a team are interviewed by a third team member about an issue with which they currently struggle.   Key members of the network are elicited. These will be different for each person/situation, for example, the person with learning disability, their family members, friends, professionals involved and others in the community. Listeners are assigned to listen to the interview as different persons in the network. In a large team or workshop format there may be more than one person listening per network member. For example, if there is a concern with the voice of the person with learning disability being unheard, more than one person may listen 'As If' they are the person. The interview focuses on the dilemma encountered and the best hopes they have for this conversation. Following the interview AS IF listeners are invited to talk together about the experience of listening. They talk in the first person 'as if' they are still in the role. For example the As if listener for the person with a learning disability may say '*My staff call it challenging behaviour but I was upset and just needed someone to talk to. No one told me my key worker was off sick.'* The person listening as a parent might reflect *'the staff at the home seem nice but I don't understand what they are trying to do, they don't ask me what I think would help with behaviours'*. Following this the interviewees are asked by the interviewer to reflect on what they have heard. Haydon-Laurelut et al (2012) sought out the views of clinical psychologists who had listened 'AS IF' and identified the following themes about the utility of the practice: '*feel less stuck; create new ideas about possible next steps, hear the voice of the person with learning disabilities, identify emotions in the system so they could acknowledge and respond to them more effectively, have a new and more empathic understanding of the individuals in the system, listen to the views of others in a non-defensive way'.*

As If listening is just one method for developing empathic concern within the networks of the person we support and of which we are a part.

In sum

The relational or systemic views sees us all as deeply connected. In our shared worlds the boundaries of 'me' and 'you' are permeable as we literally in-form one another. Being empathetic in this sense is honouring this connectedness and being responsible for the kinds of relationships, selves, families, organisations and cultures we co-create. By working collaboratively and being curious about the experiences and abilities of people and their networks experiences we can support new possibilities as network members are listened to, included and respected.

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