EXPLORING THE COMMUNICATIVE DYNAMICS

OF EMPATHIC LEARNING

by

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STATEMENT OF DISSERTATION APPROVAL

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ABSTRACT

With much of the focus on empathy coming from the professional contexts of psychology and the medical field, this study moves the scope of empathy research towards understanding how empathic communication is experienced in the personal lives of individuals. A constructivist's approach to grounded theory is used to explore the way a group of students experienced and learned communicative empathy over the course of a semester. Using symbolic interaction as a theoretical lens, this research project centers on two aspects of empathy. First, using empathy journals as a means to access students' personal experiences, it calls attention to the communicative behaviors that the students perceived as paramount to creating an empathic interaction. Second, it highlights how the students' working models of empathy changed over the course of the semester. Drawing on message design logic, the analysis shows that at the outset of the course, the students drew on linear models of communication and a predominantly expressive design logic to conceptualize empathy. By the end of the semester, the majority of the students developed more sophisticated design logics and articulated a view of empathy that was rooted in a transactional model of communication. The limitations and implications of this research are discussed in the final chapter.

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Lastly, I'd like to dedicate this labor of love to my brother, Emerson.

CHAPTER 1

A PERSONAL INTRODUCTION OF EMPATHIC COMMUNICATION

I walked out of the room completely deflated. It only took 2 hours to change my emotions from excitement, relief, and confidence to those of discouragement, embarrassment, and confusion. "What just happened?" I kept asking myself. "I was so prepared. I was ready. I put in the work!" For the 6 months prior, I had spent hours a week preparing to take my comprehensive exams, eager to move past them to work on my dissertation and to put myself one step closer to graduating with my Ph.D. It had taken me years of work, intellectual and emotional blood, sweat, and tears to reach this point. I knew I wasn't the best test taker and although I had many strengths that had helped me reach this point in my academic journey, performing well under pressure was never one of them. Perhaps this is why I doubled down on my preparation to take the essays. I spent that 6 months reviewing the content and what I had learned from each of my graduate classes. I read more books and articles in those months than during any other time period of my life and I practiced writing essays on possible topics that my five committee members might ask. When the day arrived to write my first essay, I felt ready. I just needed to remember everything I had crammed into my head, connect the dots, and dig deep to put it all together on paper in a coherent and insightful manner. After a week and

half of writing essays, I was exhausted but even more than that, I was proud of what I had done. I thought it was pretty good, no better than that. After a small break (and some sushi) I began preparing for my defense only 2 weeks away. By the time I walked into the room holding each of my five essays, I felt excited to talk about what I had done, relief to finally be at this point, and confident that I would be able to withstand all of the questions my committee would throw at me, and perhaps even impress them in the process.

Two hours later, I felt like I had been a part of a blood bath and I was the carnage. The people in the room I thought would be the most supportive and pleased with my answers weren't satisfied at all with what I had written or with my answers to their questions. I had taken a different theoretical approach in my essays than they had wanted. Only a few minutes into the defense, I became flustered, unorganized, and weakened. Superman had turned back into Clark Kent (without the glasses and much better looking). Barbara Fredrickson (2009) has conducted many studies on emotions and posits the theory that when we experience dark emotions, we get tunnel vision, which can greatly decrease our ability to think clearly and critically. In that moment she felt like a prophet. When it was over, the professors I had looked up to after years of working with them shuffled out of the room. It hurt. I hurt. They told me I needed to rewrite some of the essays (only answering new questions this time). On the way out, my committee chair tried to console me (to be honest I saw her mouth moving but nothing registered). I think she could tell as she ended the exchange by saying, "When you're ready to talk, come see me and let's talk."

On the drive home, I began to question myself. Perhaps the Ph.D. thing wasn't for me. Perhaps I had hit my intellectual ceiling and needed to accept that. Perhaps I needed

to look for a new line of work. I heard that McDonald's was hiring. For the next few days these, and even darker thoughts came crashing over me in waves. I couldn't take it any longer and I went to see my chair. I had taken several classes from this professor, respected her knowledge, her experience and track record as a researcher and teacher. However, little did I know in that moment, she was about to teach me the greatest lesson I would receive at her hands, the one I have no doubt will last with me the longest: a lesson on the power of empathic communication.

As I sat in her office with my heart in my hand, she came out from behind her desk and positioned herself closer, across from me. The look on her face was one of concern, concentration, and compassion. She asked me how I felt, letting me vocalize the melting pot, or stew, of emotions I had swirling inside of me. I surprised myself as I began talking and expressing ideas and feelings I hadn't fully processed until they came out of my mouth in that moment. She listened. Leaning forward, with a compassionate look in her eyes, I felt safe to talk honestly, openly, and vulnerably. I could tell she was there with me, in that moment. Rather than running from my pain, she had courage to lean into it and embrace my vulnerability. Periodically, she would ask me questions, probing further. I could tell she was trying to understand and I began to feel understood. When I was finished and had articulated what I felt like I needed to say, she asked me what I wanted to do. I replied, "I don't know. Maybe I need to reconsider this Ph.D. thing." Pausing, searching for what to say next, she finally responded, "Can I tell you a story about when I was sitting in your spot, facing down the comprehensive exams, anxious to move on to my dissertation?"

Now I was the one listening intently. I'm not sure if the story she shared with me

was meant to be shared in confidence, so I will not repeat it here (or to anyone). What I will say is that as she spoke, she articulated feeling emotions similar to what I was feeling, expressing concerns similar to the ones I had, and acknowledging that she knew from her experience how hard and difficult this hurdle was. When she was finished, she told me she would support whatever decision I made, although she encouraged me to not let discouragement or fear keep me from continuing to try. With encouragement and kindness in her voice, she expressed her confidence in me, telling me she knew I could do it, that she had no doubt I was intellectually capable of moving forward and getting a Ph.D. Her words were reassuring and provided me with a flicker of hope and restoring some confidence in myself. Honestly, even without her words, the feeling I got from being with her in that moment was hard to describe. Her very presence, her body, her face, her sincerity, in many ways spoke louder than her words. This time I asked her some questions, probing for more answers, clarity, and reassurance. Our dialogue created something uniquely "ours" in that space, something that could not have been created had I been speaking with any other person at that time.

I'm not sure how long we spoke, it might have been 15 minutes or it might have been 2 hours. All I know is that when I walked out of her office, I felt something that is hard to describe. Something had happened between us during our time together. An authentic and intimate connection was formed and I was confident she experienced it too. In an almost magical way, I had entered her office, lost, confused, hurt, carrying a bag full of emotions that felt almost too heavy to carry, but when our talk was over, I walked out of her office feeling nourished. The cluster of dark emotions I brought with me had somehow been transformed into a larger cluster of light ones. Sure I still had my bag, it

just wasn't so heavy anymore and I felt a new sense of confidence and hope that I would

eventually be able to drop the bag and move forward with greater determination than

ever before. As I drove home this time, I asked myself the same question

I had asked just days earlier, "What just happened?" The answer came – empathy.

An Introduction to Empathy

People enjoy rich emotional lives colored by ups and downs, sweeping highs and abject lows. The situations and circumstances that give rise to these moments are both unique to each individual and yet patterned and universal to the life cycles of the human condition. However, when life throws something at us that is thick and heavy, producing a conglomeration of dark emotions, these can often be critical moments in our lives, leaving us with decisions that have real consequences. What's more, such moments are generally not only ours to bear but have a ripple effect that influence other relationships in our lives for good or for bad. The experience I just described was one of those moments in my life. It was a turning point, where I had to decide what to do with my future, all while being submerged in a bevy of strong emotions. But emotions are not the enemy; indeed, they serve a powerful purpose in our lives. As Planalp (1999), one of the prominent scholars on emotion, has stated, "feelings are not so much a sign of trouble as a way of keeping up the pressure to understand an emotionally charged experience and reconcile it with other beliefs about the world and ways of living" (p. 5). Thus, emotions are often invitations to reconstruct and realign our experiences with our values, and guide us toward deeper levels or understanding or toward taking positive actions. The key then, becomes sifting through these emotions to find the meaning and the course of action that

propels us in a constructive direction. Ultimately, it was empathy that helped me through the dark tunnel that I found myself in following my comprehensive exams, it was empathy that provided some light and clarity, and it was empathy that kept me pursuing the goal I set for myself years before. My experience is not unique. Anyone who has experienced empathy within a relationship knows how meaningful and important it can be during challenging or difficult times. It is a visceral experience that can often be difficult to describe but its production can also be unmistakably powerful.

The power of empathy does not only manifest itself when major crises arrive, but rather its subtle presence often goes unnoticed as it connects us to those around us and to the human race in general. In his landmark book, Jeremy Rifkin (2009) draws on a vast amount of research to demonstrate how our growing knowledge of empathy has slowly begun to change our understanding of the human narrative. He points out that throughout history, philosophers, scientists, psychologists, historians, and theologians have often characterized mankind has being carnal, selfish, compulsive creatures motivated by greed and self-interest. The likes of Darwin and Freud have had a profound influence on the academic community, positing that humans are by nature driven by primal urges and will often act in egocentric ways at the expense of other humans. Looking at history, and the wars and violence enacted by people and groups, it is easy to see how some could arrive at these conclusions. However, Rifkin goes on to point out that there is another interpretation of the human narrative, one that is now being augmented by neuroscience. This new narrative posits that as a species, our baser instincts have not ruled the day but rather it is our ability to empathically work with each other that has created the nations we see and the continued striving for peace in the world. We have not destroyed each

other but over time, the world has become more communal as we have learned and continue to learn how to co-exist and help each other. In the last 2 decades, scientists have discovered that our brains have mirror neurons that literally wire us to care about the state of those around us (Braten & Trevarthen, 2007). In essence, we are programed from birth to care about each other in an empathic way and when we cultivate this side of our natures, we engage with others in prosocial ways and strengthen our relationships and our communities.

Thus, empathy serves multiple functions. As I learned while talking to my graduate advisor, empathy has the power to transform our difficult and emotional experiences towards positive ends, and empathy also has the power to connect us to others in ways that foster productive action that works to improve our collective well-being. Based on this growing body of research, scholars and practitioners have argued that there is a great need to aggressively pursue a deeper understanding of empathy, particularly how it is learned and taught so that relationships and society can reap the benefits of cultivating its power. From helping marriages and families, to helping communities and countries, the need for empathy education and empathy nurturing is immanent. Intercultural scholar Carolyn Calloway-Thomas (2010) has emphasized this point by arguing that, "Empathy is the moral glue that holds civil society together; unless humans have robust habits of mind and reciprocal behaviors that lead to empathy, society as we know it will crumble" (p. 7). Furthermore, psychologists and researchers Miller and Striver (1997) advocate for embracing empathy in these terms:

> The phenomenon of empathy is basic to all our relationships. Either we deal with the feelings that are inevitability present in our interactions by turning to each other, or we turn away. If we turn away from others without conveying recognition of the existences of their feelings, we inevitably leave the other

person diminished in some degree. We also are inevitably turning away from engaging fully with our own experience, dealing with it in a less than optimal way – that is, in isolation. (as cited in Brown, 2007, p. 57)

However, while the importance of empathy has been substantiated in many ways and its import is no longer in question, there is still considerable debate on how empathy should be defined, researched and taught. The following chapter will highlight several of the key issues and dynamics related to this debate. Consequently, at this point, it is necessary to say that my research project is meant to engage in this debate. In particular, I set out to participate in the conversation from a communicative perspective. As Preston and de Waal (2002) have noted, "Much of the empathy literature focuses on whether empathy is an emotional or cognitive process and distinguishes empathy from emotional contagion, sympathy, and perspective taking" (p. 2). This focus has only become more entrenched in the last decade as scientists have furthered our understanding of mirror neurons and the role they play in the production of cognitive and affective empathy. As a result of this debate, there is one aspect of empathy that has been left understudied and largely underappreciated, and that is the role that communication plays in the creation of empathy. As a connective force, empathy is more than an internal phenomenon, it is also a communicative one. Some scholars have recognized this, positing that "empathy exists where the journeys of two unique individuals converge. Empathy exists where realities meet, serves as a guide to the truth of the other person, and furnishes insight and understanding to where one's reality ends and the other's begins (Ciaramicoli & Ketcham, 2000)" (in Hickson & Beck, 2008, p. 378). It is this communicative convergent aspect of empathy that propelled both my desire and direction as a researcher.

Thus, when I was contemplating what I wanted to do for my dissertation, I knew

two things were important. First, I wanted to do something meaningful that would make a contribution to the academic community and its understanding of relationships and communication. Second, I knew that I wanted my research to be such that I could use it to help people improve their personal lives and their relationships. With these as my guiding concerns, I asked myself this question: If I want to help people in a meaningful way, what is one thing that has made a significant difference in my life? The more I considered this question, the more moments of empathic connection surfaced out of my memory. As I reflected on these moments, I realized that without them, I most likely would not be where I am today, doing what I am doing. Truly, it has been the people in my life who have gotten down in the dirt with me, each time I tripped on an obstacle (either of my own doing or because of things that were beyond my control), and co-created deep and meaning empathic conversations or empathic relationships with me that have made a major difference in my life. Based on this realization, I knew I wanted to study empathy, and this is how I chose to do it.

Overview of the Research Project

In what follows, I provide a brief preview of this project and outline the structure and focus of each chapter. As noted above, Chapter 2 will provide an in-depth review of the current state of empathy research, particularly as it relates to empathy and communication. In addition, this chapter will make explicit the body of research that serves as the backing for my project, namely the way empathy is both taught and learned. Drawing on these bodies of research, the argument will be formed that there is still a great need to study empathy from a communicative perspective. This argument will focus

on exploring the way a group of students experienced communicative empathy in their personal lives, moving the scope of inquiry outside of the professional contexts of psychology and the medical field which have dominated the research on empathic communication. Furthermore, given the need to develop a greater understanding of empathic communication and how it can be learned and taught, the argument will be made that there is merit in conducting research on how communication instruction can longitudinal shape the way a group of students understand empathy.

Based on the review of this literature, Chapter 3 will delineate the way in which the study was conducted and explain the epistemological and methodological approaches that guided the study. Adopting the perspective that meanings are socially constructed in and through interaction, I chose to use a constructivist approach to grounded theory to explore the empathic experiences and understanding of a group of students. In order to do this, I designed an upper division communication course that provided the students with a variety of readings on communication and empathy and afforded them various experiential learning activities both in and out of the classroom. Over the course of the semester, the students journaled about their experiences and wrote about their changing understanding of empathic communication. At the end of the semester, the majority of the students signed consent forms and allowed me to use their experiential empathy journals as data for my study. The depth and breadth of the journals was beyond the scope of one study, even one as large and rigorous as a dissertation, thus, I focused narrowly on a two elements of the journals and qualitatively analyzed their contents for insight and meaning. Chapter 4 and Chapter 5 provide the analysis of these portions of the journals.

Using symbolic interactionism as a theoretical lens, the research question that guided the analysis presented in Chapter 4 was: What are the communicative behaviors and patterns that facilitate feelings of empathy in the lived experiences of a group of students? Based on this, the students journaled about an empathic experience they participated in where they felt empathy from the person they were with. Specifically, they focused on making explicit the communication actions and words of their empathy partner, describing in detail what they did or said that helped them feel empathy with this person. Thus, this chapter highlights the various communicative actions and expressions that the journal keepers identified and codifies the significance of their role in producing empathy. Chapter 5 moves beyond analyzing the experiential journal entries of the students and instead focuses on identifying the specific ways the students' understanding of empathy and empathic communication changed over the course of the semester. Specifically, this chapter will answer the research question: In what way can empathy instruction shape students' understanding of empathic processes from a communication standpoint? To explore this process, the students wrote out their initial connotative understanding of empathy on the first day of class. After 15 weeks of instruction, experiential learning, and journaling, the students once again were asked to write out their personal definitions of empathy on the last day of the semester. These two data sets were then analyzed from a communicative perspective, exploring the way their working models of communication changed their understanding of the empathy process.

After providing the analysis of the researcher questions, Chapter 6 details the way in which the insights generated by my study either extend our current understanding of empathy or enlarge the collective discourse surrounding it. Specifically, this chapter will

connect back to the literature reviewed in the Chapter 2, by focusing on the ways in which my research moves the academic focus toward developing a greater appreciation and understanding of the role that communication plays in the production of empathy. This chapter will conclude by outlining the limitations of the study and by making suggestions for further research. Hence, I will now turn my attention to the providing a review of the relevant research that grounds this project.

CHAPTER 2

EMPATHIC COMMUNICATION: A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The intent of this project is to add to the collective body of research on empathy. This is an exciting time for empathy research, as the last few decades have seen an increased interest in the topic from scholars in a variety of fields. As this review of the empathy literature will highlight, the vast majority of empathy research situates empathy as either a cognitive or affective phenomenon. Broadly stated, my purpose is to join the growing number of scholars who are inviting the academic community to consider that empathy is also, at a very foundational level, a communicative phenomenon. Based on this, my research project is designed to highlight the importance of understanding the way communication processes create empathy. In addition, the scope of the study is meant to provide insight into the way empathy is both taught and learned by individuals, from a communicative standpoint. To highlight the need for this research, the following literature review will do the following things. First, it will broadly delineate how the concept of empathy has become a serious line of research in a variety of fields. This overview of empathy research will demonstrate that scholars still struggle to define empathy and situate its role in the social world. Following this, I will review the research on empathy that account for its communicative dynamics, specifically how verbal and

nonverbal communication work to create it in interpersonal interactions. I will also show that there is a need in the research on empathic communication to explore it as a collaborative activity that gets co-created through transactional process of communication. Lastly, because my project was developed as a way to provide insight into how empathy can be learned by students, the final sections of the chapter will review the literature in empathy education, particularly through the lens of student development and experiential learning. The chapter will conclude by providing the two research questions that guided this study.

<u>Empathy Research</u>

The concept of empathy dates as far back as the Jin Dynasty in China, when the Confucian Mencius posited that mankind had an innate sense of compassion towards the suffering of others (De Waal, 2009). For the next two millennia, philosophers, scholars, theologians, poets, and thinkers spoke to the concept of empathy often couching it in the language of compassion (Nowak, 2011). Interestingly, it wasn't until the first part of 20th century that the English word "empathy" first appeared when American psychologist Edward Titchener (1909) translated the word "einfühlung" from Lipps (1903), a German psychologist, who used the term to describe the process that an artist or a writer goes through when they imaginatively project themselves into one of their subjects whether that be a person or an inanimate object. The word then began to be used to describe the process a consumer of art or literature goes through as they attempt to understand the thoughts and feelings of the artist or author, a concept that was later termed "aesthetic empathy" (Wispe, 1968). From this beginning, the concept of empathy has been used to

describe many phenomena related to one person attempting to understand or identify with someone else's thoughts and feelings. Consequently, after a century of use, the meaning and use of the word has expanded in both its application and conceptual framework. What follows is a summary of those branches of research.

After the term empathy had been introduced into academic circles, it was briefly adopted by sociologists. However, it quickly fell out of favor because of the hermeneutic influence in that field, which believed that understanding is always mediated by culture and no singular perspective could provide definitive knowledge of a thing or person (Morrison, 1988). Following this brief flash of empathic attention, the vast majority of research about empathy prior to the 1980s came from the field of psychology. Carl Rogers, in particular, gave the word prominence in his developmental writings about "client-centered" therapy dating back to the 1950s (Raskin, 2001). This approach to therapy focused on having "unconditional positive regard" towards clients, a concept Rogers' defined as "to value the person, irrespective of the differential values which one might put on his specific behaviors" (Rogers, 1957, p. 208). In addition, Rogers believed that a therapist would have more influence to help a client if they were able to break down the power differential and communicate in a way that made the client feel that their feelings and thoughts were understood by the therapist. Within the framework of this concept, empathy was central in both listening and responding to clients.

Rogers' client-centered therapy generated a great deal of attention in the field of psychology and propelled the concept of empathy forward. Marshal Rosenberg and Charles Truax, two research assistants of Rogers, have demonstrated this in their own work. Truax extended Rogers' perspective of empathy by positing that empathy was

more than just an attitudinal mindset that a therapist could have when working with clients, but rather, he argued that empathy was a set of communicative skills that could be taught and learned (Truax & Carkuff, 1967). While Rogers was uncomfortable reducing empathy to a set of responsive reactions (this felt too mechanistic for him), he agreed that communication was paramount to empathic interactions between a therapist and a client, thus he asserted that having an empathic perspective would bring empathic communication skill (Rogers, 1980). This exchange between Truax and Rogers helped shape the empathy construct as having both cognitive and skill components. Rosenberg (2003) picked up on this and created an empathic approach to resolving conflicts and working through disputes peacefully, an approach he named "nonviolent communication." His approach centers on teaching individuals to cognitively identify their emotions and then skillfully manage those with empathy for one's self and others.

As the concept of empathy became more prominent in psychology, other fields began to study it in various ways and in the last 3 decades there has been a considerable amount of research done in fields such as medicine, social work, family studies, child development, neuroscience, philosophy, education, psychology, and communication (Arnett & Nakagawa, 1983; Broome, 1991; Cliffordson, 2002; Gallese, 2003; Lamm, Batson, & Decety, 2007; Stephan & Finlay, 1999; Stewart, 1983). In an attempt to codify this vast body of research, Miaskiewicz and Monarchi (2008) conducted an extensive literature review on empathy from 40 of the top journals in the fields of medicine, education, social work, and psychology. Using Information System software to search the digital collection of each of the 40 journals, more than 1700 peer reviewed journal articles on empathy were identified in a cluster analysis. The results of this extensive

investigation produced six themes (i.e., clusters) that were the most prominent in empathy research. These thematic clusters are as follows:

Cluster 1. (effect, response, relationships): Research about how empathy is related to factors and/or constructs, and how other factors and/or constructs affect empathy.

Cluster 2. (man, woman, gender): Research about measuring and distinguishing between empathy in men and women in a certain setting.

Cluster 3. (child, behavior, measure): Research about the relationship between levels of empathy and social behavior. In particular, research describing the negative behavioral aspects of a lack of empathy such as child abuse, aggressiveness, and lack of moral reasoning.

Cluster 4. (program, skill, group): Research about programs that train a particular group of individuals (e.g., social workers) to develop more empathy or train the group of individuals on the importance of empathy.

Cluster 5. (concept, process, understanding): Research about the understanding of the concept of empathy, empathy's dimensions, and the process involved in exhibiting empathy towards others.

Cluster 6. (rating, measure, scale): Research about developing, validating, and applying scales that measure empathy.

The cluster analysis used in Miaskiewicz and Monarchi (2008) highlights the wide range of meanings and applications the concept of empathy has achieved within the academic community. In fact, Batson (2009), after conducting his own review of the literature on empathy, argued that there are at least eight empathy-related concepts that make up the differing definitions of empathy and that need to be better distinguished in

empathy research. These eight concepts are: knowing another's internal state, assuming the posture of another, coming to feel as another person feels, projecting oneself into another's situation, imagining how another is feeling, imagining how one would think and feel in the other's place, being upset by another person's suffering, and feeling for another who is suffering (Batson, 2009).

In addition to Batson's (2009) invitation for perspicuity in defining empathy, Decety and Jackson (2004) conducted a review of much of the literature on empathy and concluded that three separate skills sit at the core of empathy: the ability to share the other person's feelings, the cognitive ability to intuit what another person is feeling, and a socially beneficial intention to respond compassionately to that person's distress. Looking at both Batson's (2009) list of eight empathy-related concepts and Decety and Jackson's (2004) three empathy skills, it becomes clear that empathy seems to have both psychological and skill based components. However, moving beyond how researchers have appropriated the concept of empathy in their research, to how scholars have actually defined the term, reveals additional layers of empathic meaning and conceptual tensions.

Empathy Definition

Empathy is a difficult concept to define. This is largely because of the incredibly broad application that scholars from a variety of fields have given it over the last several decades. It has been noted that researchers have defined empathy as an ability, an attitude, a feeling, an interpersonal process, a trait, a state, a sensitivity, and a perceptiveness (Sutherland, 1993). Perhaps one of the reasons for this stems from the

way empathy is often confused or conflated with many other concepts that have similar connotations, concepts such as perspective-taking, sympathy, emotional contagion, affective resonance, empathic accuracy, and compassion (Bates & Samp, 2011**;** Batson, Fultz, & Schoenrade, 1987; Eisenberg, 2002; Preston & Hofelich, 2012; White, 1997). There is a divide amongst empathy scholars on where to draw the boundaries between these and other related concepts in relation to phenomena we have come to identify as empathy. To complicate matters further, the concept of empathy continues to morph with advances in both the hard and soft sciences. Even 20 years ago, concepts such as "online-empathy" and "mirror neurons" did not exist (Hollan, 2012; Preece, 2004). Thus, as the world changes, so does our understanding of empathy and its important application in the social world**.** But, more importantly, as this literature review will show, it can be argued that the strongest need we have as an academic community is to develop a greater understanding of how empathy actually occurs, as a communicative process. It is to this end that this project has been conducted. The purpose of this project is to add to the expanding discourse on empathy by providing a new invitation to consider empathy production from a communicative perspective.

To frame the way this project will add to the collective discussion on empathy, it is necessary to understand the empathy definition landscape. One of the primary features of this landscape centers on the way scholars interested in empathy have aligned themselves into camps distinguished by the differing conceptualizations of empathy to which they cling. Some of these researchers adopt a narrow view of empathy (Hoffman, 2000; Ickes, 1993; Schafer, 1959; Wispe, 1986). Ignatieff (1999) provides one such definition in which empathy is conceptualized as "the human capability of imagining the

pain and degradation done to other human beings as if it were our own" (p. 313). Other scholars posit that empathy is best understood in a broad sense that encompasses many other concepts (Arnold, 2003; Eslinger, 1998; Goleman, 2006; Preston & de Waal, 2002). For example, Baron-Cohen (2003) argues that "empathy is about spontaneously and naturally tuning into the other person's thoughts and feelings, whatever these might be" (p. 21). The differences in these positions are vast, leaving room for multiple conceptualizations and applications of the term empathy. Consequently, the crux of these debates often stem from scholars who see empathy as a cognitive function versus those who view empathy as an emotive process. This debate has only intensified in recent years based on advances in science and new theorizing in sociology and anthropology.

Over the last decade, social cognitive neuroscience has shown that there are two distinct empathic functions in the brain, one cognitive and the other affective. While there is a link between the two empathic systems by the ventromedial prefrontal cortex, the operational function of each has caused some to invite the academic community to consider adopting two different notions of empathy, rather than conflating them both into one (Englen & Rottger-Rossler, 2012). Those who subscribe to the cognitive side of empathy most commonly define empathy as the mental activity of perspective taking or imagining the life of the other (Kohn, 1990). This requires the capacity for "positional thinking" where one can visualize the viewpoint of someone else (Nussbaum, 2010). Consequently, on the other side of the spectrum are those who believe empathy is primarily an emotional process, one that is produced when a person identifies with the experiences of another on an emotional level, often adopting the emotions of the other (Slote, 2009). Of course, many researchers have attempted to breach the two binaries by

advocating for definitions that make room for both. For example, Deitch Feshbach (1987) defines empathy as "a shared emotional response that is contingent upon cognitive factors" (p. 271) and Toranzo (1996) views it as "A multidimensional construct that involves the dynamic interplay of perception, social cognition, and affect" (p. 107). As was stated earlier, this dichotomy has been further heightened with increasing publications that invite those in the academic community to reconsider the role of nature verse nurture, as it relates to empathy.

Historically, many in the academic community have operated from the assumption that human beings are hard-wired with aggressive, competitive, self-serving impulses (Freud, 1958). The works of Charles Darwin and Adam Smith, an evolutionist and economist, respectively, advanced this belief by positing that in order to survive and thrive, humans were motivated to act out of self-interest and consume or destroy competition to resources. However, developments in biological, neurological, and socio-psychological research have begun to redraft the human narrative. Two seminal works on this topic have recently been published by Frans de Waal, a renowned French primatologist and ethologist, and Jeremy Rifkin, a distinguished American social theorist and economist. In de Waal's book, *The Age of Empathy* (2009), he uses decades of research studying animals to draw the conclusion that it is through empathic behaviors such as sharing, herding, and communal protection that animals survive and adapt to their environment. Rifkin's book, The Empathic Civilization (2010), furthers this argument by noting that throughout history, societies have survived and thrived in much the same way. "A radical new view of human nature has been slowly emerging," writes Rifkin, "with revolutionary implications for the way we understand and organize our economic, social,

and environmental relations… We have discovered *Homo empathicus*" (p. 43). This emerging view that Rifkin refers to, i.e., that empathy sits at the very fiber or our human nature, is a belief that is augmented by research on human development.

Early developmental theorists perpetuated the idea that young children were too egocentric or cognitively incapable of experiencing empathy (Freud 1958; Piaget 1965). Since then, this theorizing has been debunked as many studies have demonstrated that even young children are capable of behaviors that show a degree of empathic sophistication (Zahn-Waxler et al., 1992). Martin Hoffman (2000), a developmental psychologist, advocates that empathy development happens in stages, coterminous with the maturity process of an individual. The first stage he identifies as "mimicry" and manifests itself when a child responds to the distress of another child. It has been noted that this process often happens between 18 to 72 hours following birth, a process labeled reflexive crying or rudimentary empathic distress (Braten & Trevarthen, 2007; Martin & Clark, 1982). The second stage is "classical conditioning" and this happens when a child recognizes that other people experience emotional moments similar to their own emotional moments. This generally develops when a child becomes a toddler and often will compel a child to engage in helping and prosocial behaviors, such as hugs or verbalizations of concern (Zahn-Waxler et al., 1992). The next stage is "direct association" which involves a child's ability to view someone having an emotional experience and then recall a time when they had a similar experience, thus helping them take the perspective of the other.

As a child matures they move into Hoffman's (2000) fourth and fifth stages of empathy development. The fourth stage, "mediated association," is when a child shows

the ability to empathically project themselves into emotional situations represented in stories or depictions, such as movies or television. The final stage has been named "perspective taking" or "role taking" and is the most sophisticated type of empathizing because it demonstrates the ability to cognitively imagine what it is like to be another person, experiencing what they are experiencing, and feeling what they are feeling. However, recent research has challenged Hoffman's stages by arguing that children can engage in a type of perspective taking much earlier than originally thought (Knafo, Zahn-Waxler, Hulle, Robinson, & Rhee, 2008). Regardless, the body of research on empathy development illustrates that it is a process that has both genetic and environmental factors (Zahn-Waxler, Robison, & Emde, 1992). Childhood has been shown to be critical to a child's empathy development because of the plasticity of their neural and synaptic connections (Verducci, 2000). When children are immersed in a culture of empathy by their caregivers, they show greater empathic capacities as teens and adults (Mikulincer et al., 2001). This realization that communicating empathically (i.e., participating in a cultural milieu) is essential to building empathy has helped researchers value the importance of the communicative components of empathy.

As a result of the work in neuroscience, human development, and a new understanding of the human narrative, the academic community has been invited to reconsider their belief that empathy is an internal phenomenon. Rather, a community of scholars are advocating for updated definitions of empathy that recognize and explore the communicative and relational components of empathy, and that acknowledge that there are empathic behavior attributes that manifest the cognitive and affective workings that have become the cornerstones of empathy research. However, this community of

academics and clinicians still sit in the minority.

Nowak (2011) conducted a recent study on empathy and compiled a list of 52 of the most notable definitions of empathy. To avoid being academically ethnocentric, she compiled the list from a diverse group of fields and authors writing from a variety of contexts. While the point of her study was not to illustrate the communication components of these definitions, engaging in such an exercise was insightful for this literature review. After looking closely at all 52 definitions, the vast majority of the models focus on empathy as either a cognitive or affective phenomenon, and as such, the only communicative elements these definitions acknowledge are those of an empathy giver interpreting the communicative messages (usually distress) of an empathy target. In fact, only 7 of the 52 definitions provide components that could even be construed as nonlinear in their communicative underpinnings, and by that I mean they acknowledge that empathy involves a "response" by one person to the situation of another. Most surprisingly, however, is the observation that there is only one definition on the list that identifies empathy as a complex communicative process that would warrant a transactional model of communication. That definition identifies empathy as "the mediation of emotional information involving systemic communicative processes operating between relational subjects" (Schertz, 2007, in Nowak, 2011, p. 16).

Not surprisingly, some of the strongest advocates for updating the current definitions of empathy to include communicative aspects of it have come from contexts where expressed empathy has proven important. Thus, in order to understand the nature of empathic communicative research, it is essential to understand its birth and trajectory. It is to this topic the focus of this literature review now shifts.

<u>Empathy and Communication</u>

In order to understand how my study will expand the current discourse on empathy and communication, it is important to understand the academic interest in human nature following World War II. At that time, the concept of empathy was beginning to make its way into the social sciences, particularly psychology (as was noted earlier in the literature review), as scholars saw the importance of doing research that looked specifically at the cognitive and, at times, the communicative components of empathy (Dymond, 1948). While the majority of these researchers were not communication scholars and their work didn't blatantly focus on communication, their research helped pave the way for the empathic communication research that would follow, picking up the theoretical breadcrumbs they left behind. Some of these early studies focused on empathy in terms of its importance and significance in interpersonal communication in a variety of contexts. For example, in 1946, Lowery argued that nonverbal communicative gestures have an empathic quality that allows a receiver to visually see what a speaker is feeling and experiencing. Building on the idea that empathic communication could influence people, researchers looked at the importance of empathy in leadership (Bell & Hall, 1954). One of these studies, conducted by Speroff (1953), observed the interpersonal communication breakdowns between labor and management leaders and advocated the use of communicative role-reversal strategies to increase the empathy each side had for the other, thus affording leaders with an empathic tactic to help influence their followers. Basic to these early studies was the idea that empathic communication could be used as a tool or technique to achieve clarity (Frank & Sweetland, 1962). Speroff (1953) framed it in this way, "it behooves each of us, whether

we are the sender or receiver of a communication, to be fully satisfied that the other person understand the meaning and intent of the communication" (p. 163).

In the 1950s and 60s, the majority of the research on empathy came from the field of psychology and much of this research focused on empathy development and empathy as a cognitive state that needed to be assessed and measured in clients in order to help individuals develop healthy relationships and avoid maladaptive behavior (Bell, Hall, & Stolper, 1955; Dymond et al., 1952; Hastorf & Bender, 1952; Remmers, 1950; Worringer, 1953). However, when Carl Rogers (1957) appropriated empathy as a foundational component of his approach to therapy, his research and theorizing propelled scholars and clinicians to rethink empathy as a way of being as a therapist. This shift in empathic focus generated communicative research on interpersonal empathic messages in therapeutic contexts and beyond (Argyris, 1965; Berlo, 1966; Keefe, 1976). Suddenly, empathy was seen as a skill that could be fostered and developed to respond to the messages of others (Whiting, 1971). Psychologists were now being taught to communicate empathically when dealing with clients. Hill and Courtright (1981) summed up the communicative foci of this type of research by noting that this approach stresses that "for behavior to change individuals must perceive that they are being understood. It is not enough for a counselor to merely make understanding statements, rather these statements need to be perceived by clients as indicating understanding" (p. 215). It is clear that from this perspective, researchers were viewing empathy as a skill that psychologists could develop and use to change their clients' behaviors if they responded in a way that hit the empathic bulls eye of a client.

During this same time frame, communicative empathy research moved into the

field of marriage and family development. Researchers began to consider the way empathy influenced the communicative aspects of intimacy (Katz, 1963; Kirkpatrick & Hobart, 1954; Shantz, 1981). Goodman and Ofshe (1968) furthered this line of research by having three sets of couples perform activities that required them to guess what their partner was thinking based on their communicative words and gestures, much like in the game Charades. The three sets of couples were divided based on their familiarity and commitment to each other, i.e., married couples, dating couples, and strangers. Based on the performance of each grouping, the researchers concluded that "the more empathic two people are vis-à-vis each other, the more short circuited their communication becomes" (Goodman & Ofshe, 1968, p. 603). This ability to use "fewer units of information" when exchanging messages and "transmitting meaning" denotes the concept of communication efficiency (Weinstein, Feldman, Goodman, & Markowitz, 1972). Based on their study, the researchers concluded that:

> Increasing commitment of two people to each other in courtship typically leads to increased communication between them… This intense and intimate communication ordinarily results in heightened possibilities for each to observe and understand the perspective of the other, i.e., to empathize with the other. This increase in mutual empathy leads to greater communication efficiency, since meaning can be transmitted in gestures as well as complete behavior acts and the former is more efficient than the latter. (Goodman & Ofshe, 1968, p. 603)

Each of these early studies helped forge the path between empathy and communication as an area of serious research and demonstrated the value of conducting such research. However, it is interesting to note that each of these studies uses linear models of communication in talking about empathy, i.e., senders sending messages to receivers. In addition, reviews of this research have shown that the vast majority of these empathic communication studies were one dimensional studies built on quantitative

scales and questionnaires (Bachrach, 1975; Bylund & Makoul, 2005; Duan & Hill, 1996; Grief & Hogan, 1973; Hogan, 1969; La Monica, 1981; Lachter & Mosek, 1995; Mehrabian & Epstein, 1972; Neumann at al., 2009). After conducting a review of this research, Pedersen (2009) commented on the state of empathy research by noting that, "Qualitative approaches are rarely used and the predominant quantitative instruments have a relatively narrow or peripheral scope" (p. 307). Looking at the landscape of empathic research over the last 30 years has shown that narrow theorizing about empathy continued to dominate empathy research about communication (Nowak, 2011). Consequently, while these early empathic communication studies situated the importance of communication to empathy as an activity that is accomplished interpersonally, there were a few voices that invited empathy researchers to extend their thinking about the role that communication plays in empathy. Two of the primary ways these voices have attempted to push empathic communication research forward is to, first, explore the way specific empathic behaviors influenced individuals' subjective experiences of empathy, and second, to explore the collaborative nature of empathic communication. Each of these will be explored next.

<u>Empathy and Communication Behaviors</u>

As research about empathy expanded, it was the lived experiences and struggles born from clinical work that began to drive certain avenues of research. One such example was the need for greater understanding into identifying precise communication behaviors that created feelings of empathy in people. This line of inquiry was specifically driven by the fields of psychology, social work, and medicine (i.e., healthcare). In each of

these settings, research has increasingly demonstrated the benefits that come when counselors, therapists, and healthcare providers communicate empathically with clients or patients (Hall, 2009; Mast, 2007). These findings prompted a constellation of studies that sought to isolate specific behaviors that counselors and medical workers could enact to help their clients/patients *feel* empathy. What follows is brief summary of this line of research and some examples to highlight how it has been studied.

Verbal communication. The field of psychology has a rich history of identifying types of verbal messages that have been identified as empathic in a therapeutic context. Carl Rogers (1957) is credited with being the first to advocate for a specific type of verbal communication that used empathy as a way to connect with a client's inner-world. This communicative approach was labeled "reflection of feelings" and centered on a counselor focusing on the feelings of a client and then verbally commenting on what they observed and probing to see if they correctly understood the feelings and perspective of the client. Thus, probing emotional questions and verbal messages about the emotional state of a client were identified as two types of verbal empathic communication. Similar observations have been made in the field of healthcare where much of the research done on empathy has focused on the way physicians verbally respond to patients. For example, multiple studies have identified the importance of asking questions as a form of empathy (Halpern, 2001; Norfolk, Birdi, & Walsh, 2007). These studies note that patients feel empathy when a physician is attentive to a patient's verbal or nonverbal expressions of emotion and discomfort and asks questions for clarification about how the patient is actually feeling. Unfortunately, there seems to be doubt as to how effectively physicians use this form of verbal communication. Easter and Beach (2004) found that physicians

missed 70% of the empathic opportunities of patient-initiated messages soliciting empathy. Other studies have shown that physicians often do not respond to any of the emotional cues they receive from patients (Butow, Brown, Cogar, Tattersall, & Dunn, 2002; Epstein & Street, 2007).

In addition to noting the importance of probing questions into a patient's or client's emotional state, scholars have identified specific types of verbal statements that carry empathic weight. Anspach (1998) studied how physicians communicated medical cases to patients and found that physicians were viewed as more empathic when they used patients' names, crafted personalized rather than depersonalized messages, used an active rather than passive voice, and commented in a way that showed value for the patient's account of what they were experiencing. Wittenberg-Lyle et al. (2012) added to this type of research by analyzing video recorded sessions of biweekly web-based videoconferences between interdisciplinary hospice team members and family caregivers and acknowledged specific types of verbal messages that the team members used to show empathy to the caregivers. They identified three types of empathic messages used. The first of these came in the form of comments that showed acknowledgement for the caregivers situation, comments such as, "Well, I'm glad she is sleeping a little bit better for you" (p. 34). Another form of empathic messages came with verbal expressions that legitimized and confirmed the thoughts of the caregiver. For example, messages such as, "Bless your heart, that puts you in a real spot," and "It's not an easy decision [turning off the defibrillator], but you've got our support" (p. 34). In addition, they noted another type of verbal expression of empathy came in the form of comments that acknowledged a shared experience between the hospice team member and the family caregiver. Examples

of these types of comments were, "[I had a patient] just like that. Your situation is the reverse. The quality of life just isn't what it was before. I think it's a good decision" (p. 34). Out of the three types of empathic statements, shared feelings were the least prevalent and acknowledgement the most prevalent.

Statements that show validation have been another focus of empathic communicative research. Validating communication has been conceptualized as communicating to an individual that their responses, either emotional or behavioral, are understandable and make sense given the current life situation (Linehan, 1993). Thus, researchers have identified that any such verbal statements that express this type of belief provide an empathic response to someone in distress (Clark, 2004; 2007). Central to this form of empathic communication is the ability of an empathy giver to recognize the emotional state of another, accurately reflect that through words, and then convey acceptance of the feelings, thoughts, or behaviors of the person in distress (Lynch, Chapman, Rosenthal, Kuo, & Linehan, 2006). Recently, a group of researchers conducted an experiment to test the empathic impact that verbal statements of validation can have in comparison to statements of reflection (Eunha & Changdai, 2013). The researchers had participants engage in a computer game that was set up to make them feel excluded from the gaming community participating in the game. Following the exercise, the participants were put into one of the three groups that helped them debrief their experience in the game. The control group debriefing simply focused on the mechanics of the game. The second group provided comments that might have reflected the player's feelings of exclusion. The third debriefing group provided comments that validated the players that not only reflected what they were feeling but acknowledged those feelings as acceptable

to the experience they had while playing the game. The results revealed that both the reflective and validating comments increased the participants' sense of belonging; however, the validation responses played a more significant role in increasing the participants' self-esteem and lowering "both the negative mood and aggression toward the people who excluded the participants" (p. 442). The research conducted by these scholars invites the academic community to consider that while reflective comments can show empathy, it is perhaps validating comments that carry more empathic weight.

Suchman, Markakis, Beckman, and Frankel (1997), wanting to further our understanding of verbal communication behaviors and empathy, conducted a qualitative analysis of 23 video recordings and transcripts of patient-physician interactions. Their research team coded "all of the instances in which patients expressed emotions verbally and noted the nature and apparent consequences of the physicians spoken response" (p. 679). Because their goal was to identify empathic patterns of interaction, they conceptualized an empathic encounter as a communicative exchange that leaves a patient with the subjective experience of feeling known and understood. However, because they could not determine this without speaking to the patients, they developed an operationalized definition based on observable behaviors in the video, namely, "that in the presence of a verbalized emotion on the patient's part, the clinician communicates back to the patient some explicit recognition of the expressed emotion" (p. 681). Following their analysis, they noted that the patients rarely verbalized their emotions directly but rather that they offered clues or "statements about situations or concerns that might plausibly be associated with an emotion" (p. 681). These statements were identified as potential empathic opportunities that would either turn into direct empathic

opportunities, if the physician invited the patient to elaborate on the statement, or a missed opportunity, if the patient's statement went unacknowledged or was ignored completely by the physician. Consequently, if the physician's request for elaboration was accepted and the patient explicitly commented on their emotional life, then the physician had the opportunity to respond in an empathic way, completing the empathic exchange. The empathic responses were supportive statements by the physician that acknowledged the patient's feelings in an accurate and explicit way.

The sequential empathic communicative model that was developed as a result of the study for Suchman et al. (1997) built on prior research on empathic responses by emphasizing the importance of paying attention to empathic opportunity statements, rather than looking for direct statements of emotion. Furthermore, it invites others in the helping role (in this case physicians) to pay attention to the responses they provide to those opportunities, namely, it is critical to ask people in distress to elaborate on their emotions, thus setting up the potential for an empathic exchange. Lastly, it identifies the importance of validation in empathic communication and the significance of reassuring a person in distress that it is okay to feel the way they do. Consequently, in the limitations of their study the authors acknowledge that additional research needs to account for the subjective experience of those receiving empathy as it relates to all specific communicative behaviors, not just verbal expressions. They posit that "giving names to these interactional events [and behaviors] renders them more visible, facilitating both teaching and subsequent research" (Suchman et al., 1997, p. 681).

Nonverbal communication. In addition to looking at how verbal communication can generate feelings of empathy in clients and patients, researchers have also

investigated the importance of nonverbal behaviors on empathy. However, after surveying this literature, McHenry, Parker, Baile, and Lenzi (2012) recently noted that "nonverbal communication is less frequently addressed in the empathy literature," and they go on to point out that this is ironic because of the large body of research that has shown that nonverbal communication "is critical to understanding and conveying emotion" (p. 1073). Despite this lack of research, several studies have shown that certain communicative gestures, such as eye contact, posture, touch, vocalics, and proxemics have contributed to clients' and patients' feelings of empathy during interactions with their counselors, social workers, or physicians (Dowell & Berman, 2013; Gaushell, 1982; Graves & Robinson, 1976; Hall, 2009; Kelly, 1972; Lynch & Garrett, 2010; Shiel, 1996; Tyson & Wall, 1983; Young, 1980). The following are some examples of this type of research.

McHenry et al. (2012) conducted a study that analyzed audio recordings of oncology healthcare providers talking with cancer patients. They did this by playing segments of the recordings to a group of listeners (i.e., 27 graduate students in a voice disorders class). They had each of the students classify how they interpreted the empathic qualities of the voices on the recordings. The results of the study showed that all but one of the healthcare providers reduced their speaking rate, and that a majority of them reduced their pitch when they had to give a patient bad news. As a result of their analysis, the listeners collectively interpreted that when a healthcare provider actually lowered their pitch and reduced their speaking rate they were perceived as more caring and empathic in their tone. The researchers argued that greater attention needs to be given to the importance of vocalics during empathic interactions.

In addition to paralanguage, researchers have acknowledged the importance of kinesics in empathy interactions. Maurer and Tindall (1983) studied the influence of nonverbal behaviors on the perception of empathy by having 80 participants meet with counselors seeking guidance. The counselors assumed two different body postures when meeting with the participants: They either mirrored the position of the participant's arms and legs or they did not. Following the session, the participants rated the level of empathy they felt from their counselors. The results showed that the counselors that enacted mirrored behaviors were rated significantly higher on an empathy scale than those that did not. The researchers posit that counselors should consider mirroring the behaviors of those sitting across from them as a way to help them feel more comfortable and to feel that they are being understood and validated. The importance of kinesics have also proven empathically valuable in healthcare. Ellinston and Buzzanell (2008) asked women who were being treated for breast cancer what communicative behaviors from their physicians helped them feel empathy. After qualitatively analyzing the narratives, the researchers found that the patients preferred doctors who used nonverbal cues such as more eye contact and facial expressions when discussing their illness. Moreover, the narratives also identified the importance of haptics, as the women expressed how empathically comforting it was to have appropriate forms of physical touch. Frank (2004) conducted a similar study, asking patients to give narratives about how they experienced or did not experience empathy from their physicians. This study also noted the importance of nonverbal communication, particularly eye contact and touch.

Nonverbal and verbal messages of empathy. Examining the research on empathic behaviors, scholars have acknowledged that there is still a greater need for empathy

research that accounts for both the verbal and nonverbal, rather than just one or the other. Specifically, they argue that research in this way "would contribute to a more thorough understanding of the complex processes involved in the expression and perception of empathy and eventually to the enhancement of communication curricula development" (McHenry et al., 2012, p. 1077). My review of the literature confirmed those findings that indeed there is a very limited amount of research that has looked at the verbal and nonverbal behaviors of communication simultaneously. Perhaps this is because it may appear easier to separate them and to look narrowly at one or the other. However, the following examples highlight some of the attempts to conduct this type of research that examines the two behaviors together.

Haase and Tepper (1972) had 26 seasoned counselors view films of 48 counselor-client dyads and rate their verbal and nonverbal behaviors based on an empathy scale. After viewing the recordings, the counselors identified both the verbal and nonverbal as important in contributing to the empathic communication being demonstrated by the therapist in the film. However, collectively they overwhelming rated the nonverbal communication as more empathic. In particular, they identified eye contact, trunk leanings, body orientation, and the distance between counselor and client as important elements of nonverbal communication. A few years later, Tepper and Haase (1978) recreated their study but added in the client's perspective. In this study, they had 15 counselors and 15 clients rate videotaped recordings of counselor-client interactions and identify their perception of the empathic communication being displayed. Similar to their first study, the researchers found that once again, the nonverbal communicative behaviors were perceived to make the most impact. However, by adding the client's perspective, the

researchers discovered that the majority of the clients and counselors disagreed on the strength of which communicative behaviors were the most empathic. Specifically, the clients found facial expressions and vocalics to carry a great deal of empathic weight. Together these studies supported the notion that perhaps nonverbal communication needed to receive more attention when teaching and training counselors to be more empathic. Consequently they also found that there needed to be a balance of verbal and nonverbal communication in order to achieve a more complete empathic experience.

Wanting to add further insight into the communication between psychologists and their clients, Bachelor (1988) also chose to look at specific empathy behaviors by conducting research on client's perceptions of their interactions with therapists. However, rather than having the participants fill out empathy measures or scales, Bachelor opted for a qualitative approach that allowed the clients to provide narratives of their experiences. Following their therapy sessions, the clients wrote out open ended responses to questions about their interactions with their therapists, and the empathic behaviors and dynamics they perceived and experienced during the interaction. After analyzing the data, four types of communicative empathy were identified. The first is cognitive, which focused on a therapist's verbal communication, such as questions, reformulations, interpretations, and other statements that caused the client to believe that the therapist had correctly understood their perspective. The second type of empathic communication was affective. While there were some verbal features of this, clients noted that this type of empathy came primarily through nonverbal communicative behaviors that made the client feel that the therapist understood the way they felt. The third type that Bachelor identified was sharing empathy, which manifested itself verbally when a therapist shared a personal

experience or opinion that helped the client feel they had something in common. The final type of communicative empathy was labeled "nurturant" and involved both verbal and nonverbal behaviors that caused the clients to feel that the therapist was being supportive, security providing, and completely attentive. Ironically, the author does not delineate specific behaviors for this category.

Another study that looked at the verbal and nonverbal aspects of empathic communication was conducted by Wynn and Wynn (2006). The authors conducted a qualitative analysis of 20 videotaped interactions between psychotherapists and clients to investigate the way empathy manifested itself in the actual conversation between the two conversants. The researchers analyzed the tapes and "special focus was placed on identifying sequences where empathy was an issue directly or indirectly" (Wynn & Wynn, 2006, p. 1387). Following their analysis, the researchers identified three types of communicative empathy that coincided with types found by Bachelor (1988), namely cognitive empathy, affective empathy, and sharing empathy. Cognitive empathy was coded when a "therapist directly expresses understanding of the thoughts, feelings, or behavior of the patient" followed by a confirmatory response by the patient (p. 1389). For example, the following is an exchange taken directly from their data:

> Patient, "I have been feeling so down."
> Therapist: "And you are very anxious too."
> Patient: "Yes."

By correctly identifying and verbally acknowledging that the patient was "anxious," the therapist was able to communicatively demonstrate they understood the perspective of the patient. Affective empathy was coded by the researchers in "sequences where the therapist demonstrates that he/she partakes in the patients' feelings" and the

patient shows acceptance of the therapist's expressions (p. 1390). For example, when a therapist briefly touched the shoulder of a client during difficult or emotional moments during their conversation, this was interpreted as an empathic gesture by the therapist to partake in the client's feelings and comfort them. Lastly, sharing empathy, which the researchers noted as being "characterized by the patient perceiving his/her therapist as expressing that they have something in common, for instance, in the form of personal opinions or experiences" (p. 1392). The example they used in the study was of a therapist using "we" and "us" language when speaking to a client about the physiological reactions people and animals have when frightened.

Making sense of their research, Wynn and Wynn (2006) offered further support for looking at empathic communication sequentially, positing that the key to understanding empathy in interaction consists of looking at three part sequences. The sequences they identified were: 1) the distressed individual initiated an empathic opportunity, 2) an empathy provider responded in an empathic way, either verbally, nonverbally, or both, and 3) then the empathic gesture is received and confirmed by the empathy receiver. Furthermore, the researchers noted that there was a range of behaviors and responses that manifested themselves during the empathic interactions. When empathy was expressed by the provider, the patient typically received the empathic expression by responding appropriately to the provider's prior utterance. The reception of the empathic utterance can involve a range of different utterances, including the answering of questions, agreeing with assertions, demonstrating understanding, and an appropriate showing of feelings (Wynn & Bergvik, 2010).

Looking at the collective studies on empathy and communicative behaviors

reveals at least two areas that need to be addressed. First, there seems to be a discrepancy in the impact of the behaviors identified. As was highlighted above, when patients or clients are asked to provide narratives of the communicative behaviors they found most empathic in therapists or physicians, they constantly place nonverbal communication as being essential. Ironically, studies have shown that this perception is not shared by physicians and therapists. For example, in 2010, Coran, Arnold, and Arnold asked 36 physicians what communicative strategies they felt were most effective in their communication with their patients. A qualitative analysis of their open-ended responses showed they felt that verbal communication was most strongly linked to empathic communication. Looking at this mismatch, the authors conclude that:

> Perhaps this is the time to change the way communication has been taught and perceived in the medical field and move to a more interdisciplinary, dyad centered training approach that allows a more relational and co-constructed relationship between the physicians and their patients. (Coran et al., 2010, p. 10)

Given this discrepancy in impact of verbal and nonverbal empathic communication, it is clear that more qualitative research is needed to help the academic community understand the way empathy behaviors influence empathy recipients so that more effective empathy training and development programs can be created and instituted. However, there is also a second gap that needs to be filled in this body of research. Surveying this cluster of research on the verbal and nonverbal empathic behaviors, whether they have been studied separately or together, reveals that the scope of these studies has been limited to the contexts of psychology and healthcare. As was pointed out earlier, because of the clinical interpersonal work in these fields it makes intuitive sense why they would be the most interested in understanding empathic communication in this way. However, as a result, what we know about empathy behaviors as an academic

community is almost exclusively limited to a sick bed or a therapist's couch. After

surveying the literature on empathic communication, Wittenberg-Lyle et al. (2012)

lamented:

> Thus far the majority of research on empathy has been based in a physician–
> patient context, yielding important conclusions about physician communication
> and patient expectations, yet little is known about empathic communication in
> other clinical [and nonclinical] settings. (p. 32)

There is simply a glaring need for research that asks individuals to share their

lived experiences of empathy and empathy behaviors beyond clinical settings. While it

may be that the empathy behaviors these studies have identified are universal in nature,

further research is needed in order support that assumption. Consequently, it would also

not be surprising to find out that the context of the empathic experience makes a

qualitative difference in the way an individual interprets and feels empathy. Based on

this, my study will explore the lived experience of individuals outside of a therapeutic or

healthcare setting, and while the results of my exploration are not meant to draw

generalizations that transcend the small sample size used for the study, they should

enlarge the narrative surrounding empathy behaviors and their impact on individuals.

In addition to extending the current understanding of empathic communication by

looking at new interpretations of empathic behaviors (i.e., the dance steps of empathy),

there is a need for developing a more complex understanding of the nature of

communication when people interact empathically (i.e., the dance itself).

Collaborative Empathy

After surveying the landscape of empathy research, Clark (1980) argued that

scholars had only scratched the surface of the topic and reasoned that there was a need for

greater empathy research from an interpersonal communicative perspective. Heeding this call, Bennett (1980) published a qualitative argument calling for a new way to view empathic communication. He argued that the assumption of similarity in the research on empathy (i.e., the Golden Rule of assuming that others experience the world as we do) actually fostered a linear sympathetic communicative strategy that assumed that people experience interactional realities conterminously. Bennett saw this as ethnocentric and advocated for a platinum rule that would allow for multiple realities to exist and would push empathy towards dialogic communication where both parties were focused on understanding the other's worlds causing communicative partners to "do unto others as they would have done unto themselves" (p. 417). Barrett-Lenard (1981) built on Bennett's theorizing by arguing that empathy is a phenomenon that is best understood as a collaboration between a therapist and a client as opposed to the conventional thinking which espoused that empathy was both a relational quality and strategy that a therapist should "give" to a client. This shift in empathic emphasis invited the academic community and clinicians to move beyond seeing empathy as a series of strategic responses and to move toward viewing it as a collaborative act whereby the individuals involved were using communication to facilitate joint understanding of each other's worlds. This new viewpoint on empathic communication revealed there was a need for research and theorizing that accounted for the transactional meaning making process of empathy. It was within the instructional context that scholars would pursue this line of thought.

In 1983, Stewart published an article extending the thinking of collaborative empathy. In this piece, Stewart provides an alternative to the psychologically driven

definitions of empathy that situate it as the cognitive process of trying to see the world from another's perspective. This alternative involves shifting the focus away from psychologized notions of empathy toward an awareness and application of interpretive listening, where decentering and perception checking help interlocutors co-create shared meaning through communication. Stewart posits three pedagogical advantages for making this shift; first, it "can help turn students away from the tendency to objectify selves" and instead help them be "sensitive to the communicating that is happening between or among persons"; second, it encourages students to seek understanding of another through dialogic probing questions and perception checking rather than trying to mentally visualize their worlds; and third, "students can also learn that not only can it be productive to 'listen your way into new ideas,' but it also works best to 'listen your way into new relationships'… because of the mutually-creative contact that occurs between persons" (p. 389). Following Stewart's invitation to reimage empathy in more complex communicative ways, intercultural communication researchers heeded his call.

In an essay addressing the need for greater empathic communicative theorizing in the literature on intercultural communication, Broome (1991) posited that communication research needed to move beyond linear thinking and toward transactional models that accounted for the relational dynamics at play in any given empathic interaction. Specifically, Broome (1991) posited that, "the development of shared meaning must move the focus beyond both self and other to the interaction between communicators" (p. 247). DeTurk (2001) supported such an approach as being valuable to helping individuals communicate across cultures in many contexts. Rather than focusing on the cognitive exercise of one individual attempting to place themselves into the situation of another

individual, which implies a crossing of experiential borders between two people, DeTurk advocates for an empathic perspective the removes borders and focuses on the interconnectedness of the human experience. In what way is this type of empathy possible? DeTurk's answer is this: "returning, then, to the question of empathy in intercultural interactions, it seems that attempting to perceive others' internal frames is not what is important or appropriate. Instead, we should foster relational empathy through dialogue" (p. 380). Taking such a position places the emphasis of empathy on understanding as opposed to accuracy. Rather than hitting or missing the bull's-eye on how a person sees or feels in any given situation, relational empathy asserts that it is far more important for individuals to communicate openly and develop a relationship where each feels the other is *trying* to understand them.

Another major component of the relational empathic approach that DeTurk (2011) advocates is for a more complex understanding of identity and power. As in all human relationships, power is ever present and thus influences the communicative dynamics of any interaction. This holds true for empathy as well. Because DeTurk is critiquing the dominant empathic paradigms used in intercultural communication literature, namely that empathy is a competency that individuals can develop as a way to understand the cultural experiences of another, she posits that there needs to be a greater appreciation for the way power and privilege silence identities in empathic interactions. "Every individual is a web of identities, including gender, race, age, occupation, sexual orientation, and nationality, to name a few… and these identities may be triggered" during any empathic exchange (DeTurk, 2001, p. 379). For power differences to be broken down, DeTurk believes that individuals should feel safe to bring their whole selves into an empathic dialogue without

the fear of being misunderstood because they are female or black or a member of any other historically underprivileged group. Again, adopting such a stance places emphasis on the importance of fostering understanding empathic relationships where individuals feel comfortable creating dialogues of shared meaning as opposed to one individual suppressing multiple identities to find empathic acceptance.

Following DeTurk's (2001) article and invitation to reframe empathy research in collaborative and relational ways, scholars, particularly communication scholars, have failed to pursue this line of theorizing. What has happened instead is communication researchers interested in interpersonal communication and empathy have developed more quantitative empathy scales to add to the abundance of such scales that have been created in other fields, particularly psychology. The newest wave of this type of empathy research in the communication field has focused on empathic listening. Building on other listening styles measures (e.g., Johnston, Weaver, Watson, & Barker, 2000; Watson, Barker, & Weaver, 1995; Weaver, Watson, & Barker, 1996), Bodie, Gearhart, Denham, and Vickery (2013) have developed an Active-Empathic Listening questionnaire that seeks to measure a person's predisposition for being an empathic listener by having them rate themselves on empathic listening attributes. The questionnaire has also been used to measure an individual's perception of others' empathic listening attributes (Bodie, 2011). While there is merit in developing such measures, they fail to account for the collaborative nature of empathy discussed above and they continue the linear theorizing (i.e, focusing on senders and receivers) that has dominated nearly all of the interpersonal empathy research to date. Because of this, there is still a great need to heed the call from Stewart (1983), Broome (1991) and DeTurk (2001) to look at empathic communication

as a collaborative activity. This is one of the primary focuses of my study, to explore the way students' lived experiences with empathic communication shape the way they view the collaborative nature empathy gets enacted and felt.

Looking at the research on empathy and communication (as delineated above) demonstrates that there is a need for further research on not only developing a deeper appreciation for empathic communication, but also for how to teach and develop such an understanding in individuals. Because my study is a longitudinal study that was created around helping students develop a deeper understanding of empathy and communication, it is necessary to review the literature on empathy and education. Thus, it is to that topic the focus now shifts.

<p style="text-align:center;">Empathy and Education</p>

The connection between education and empathy has captured the interest of educators, school administrators, school counselors, and researchers interested in helping individuals learn empathy or develop greater empathy within an educational setting (Suthakaran, 2011). As a result of the interest in empathy education, several teaching models and approaches have been used in a variety of fields and learning contexts. Because the primary target of this research project is to explore students' learning of empathy from a communicative perspective it is necessary to document the trajectory of empathy education and development. Thus, this section will offer a literature review of the relevant work that has paved the way for those interesting in facilitating empathic learning.

As mentioned in the previous section of this literature review, empathy instruction

and early education attempts came from the field of psychology following WWII in conjunction with the rise of humanistic approaches to therapy (Rogers, 1980). These early approaches centered on teaching therapists and counselors to communicate more empathically when dealing with distressed patients. This approach has had a strong influence on how empathy has been studied within the educational domain. The majority of the early research on empathy in education focused on helping teachers communicate empathically with their students, analogous to the Rogerian client-centered therapeutic process, where the teachers represent the counselor or therapist and the students the patients or clients (Carkhuff & Berenson, 1967). However, as empathy research in education progressed, the importance of empathy in students continued to be linked to positive outcomes such as academic success, social and emotional competence, prosocial and moral behavior, regulation of aggression and regulation of other antisocial behaviors (Bonner & Aspy, 1984; Brehm, Fletcher, & West, 1981; Chang, 2003; Findlay, Girardi, & Coplan, 2006; Zeidner, Roberts, & Mathews, 2006). These benefits have spawned various approaches to teaching empathy at all levels of education in the U.S.

According to Feshbach and Feshbach (2009), the approaches to teaching empathy can be grouped into two categories. The first are programs that focus on methods or techniques used to increase empathy (as a skill) with the belief that this will then lead students to positive outcomes. The second set of programs focuses on teaching empathy in a way that targets cognitive, affective, behavioral, or academic goals based on the assumption that this will then foster skill development and bring the positive attributes attributed to empathy. Both of these schools of thought have made their way into the literature on teaching empathy to students from kindergarten to higher education.

Those who adopt a skill-improvement approach to teaching empathy have used many different pedagogical methods and techniques to help students of all ages increase their empathic skill. Role taking or role-playing has been identified in multiple studies as being an effective way to increase a student's empathy (Barak, Engle, Katzir, & Fishier, 1987; Underwood & Moore, 1982). This can happen in multiple ways where teachers have the students imaginatively play the role of a fictitious or historical personality or by having them try to experience what it would be like to be someone of another race, gender or background (Hammond, 2006). Central to this approach to teaching empathy is helping students practice perspective taking as a way to try and experience what life might look like and feel that for another individual. Research has shown that when students increase this skill, they are more likely to raise their levels of empathy (Feshbach & Konrad, 2001). In addition, research on helping people develop emotional intelligence, such as becoming skilled at recognizing the emotional state of others, as well as one's own emotional landscape, have been shown to increase the empathic skills of students (Kremer & Dietzen, 1991). Perhaps this is why many disciplines in higher education are using role-play as a way to teach communication and empathic skills (Rao & Stupans, 2012). This has proven particularly true in the medical field, where role-playing exercises have often proven more successful in helping medical students develop empathic communication skills in comparison to traditional, lecture based teaching methods (O'Brien et al., 2007).

Educators and instructors who subscribe to the second pedagogical position on teaching empathy, i.e., focusing on educational goals rather than skill development, have also developed teaching techniques that are targeted towards increasing a student's

understanding of empathy. One of these techniques is helping students find similarities between groups of people or points of connection, to break down barriers to empathy that are more likely to be put into place when individuals feel that the world of an "other" is very different from their own (Brehm, Fletcher, & West, 1981). Modeling empathic behavioral responses is another way teachers have reported helping students increase their understanding of empathy. This can happen either through live enactments or video clips from television shows or movies (Kohn, 1991). Others believe that exposing students to groups and individuals from different socioeconomic backgrounds and cultures fosters learning experiences in empathy, which can happen either through mediated exposure, bringing guests into the classroom, or having students take field trips to places such as homeless shelters or hospitals (Sinclair & Fraser, 2002). Lastly, some efforts have been made to help students develop greater empathic perspectives by making curriculum changes in the way students learn subjects such as art, history, literature, and social studies. These efforts range from having students do projects that require empathy and coordination with their fellow students (Arnson, 1979), to changing the materials covered within a course subject to include examples that invite students to have empathy for a variety of different types of people (Lizarraga, Ugarte, Cardella-Elawar, Iriarte, & Baquedano, 2003).

The two different approaches for teaching empathy identified by Feshbach and Feshbach (2009), as delineated above, are by no means mutually exclusive. In fact, in recent years there have been efforts to integrate both approaches to foster a more holistic curriculum for teaching empathy. One of the most successful of these efforts comes from programs designed to teach social emotional learning, or SEL, in K-12 schools. The

primary goal of this approach is to help students acquire emotional and social intelligence competencies through exercises in skill development and by promoting subject material that targets cognitive learning in those areas (Greenberg, 2010). A recent meta-analysis of SEL programs has provided evidence that they are helping students on both a social and emotional level, as well as academically (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011). The pedagogical foundations of these efforts have also made their way into higher education. Zajonc (2013) has noted:

> During the last fifteen years a quiet pedagogical revolution has taken place in colleges, universities, and community colleges across the United States and increasingly around the world. Often flying under the name "contemplative pedagogy," it offers to its practitioners a wide range of educational methods that support the development of student attention, emotional balance, empathetic connection, compassion and altruistic behavior, while also providing new pedagogical techniques that support creativity and the learning of course content. (p. 83)

With its focus on holistic learning, professors and academic administrators have created and advanced many programs and practices that promote empathy development. These not only draw on some of the pedagogical approaches identified above, but more importantly, they focus on allowing the student to bring their whole selves into the learning space by engaging in collaborative learning activities. Educators interested in teaching and facilitating empathic growth now have many student-centered, engaging options to choose from, such as team-based learning, inter-teaching activities, discussion circles, and creating jigsaw classrooms (Nowak, 2011; Saville, Lawrence, & Jacobsen, 2012). In addition, a growing number of teachers are using critical pedagogy to challenge their students' assumptions about race, class, sexuality, and gender, by using dialogic teaching that centers on fostering empathy (Zembylas, 2012). Other creative approaches for teaching empathy or fostering empathy development in higher education have

involved empathic listening role-playing (Hatcher et al., 1994), using narrative fiction (Whalen, 2010), film (Hunter, 2008), poetry (Ingram & Nakazawa, 2003), acting (Deloney & Graham, 2003), music and dance (Ziolkowska-Rudowicz & Kladna, 2010), and storytelling (Charon, 2001). Each of these approaches centers on helping students develop not only on an intellectual level, but also on nurturing personal growth in areas such as compassion and empathy in nondidactic ways to strengthen communities and the global family (Palmer & Zajonc, 2010). The methodologies associated with these holistic and creative approaches to teaching empathy move educators to adopt new forms of assessment and learning objectives.

In looking at empathy teaching and learning, research has shown that using a variety of methods, longitudinally, seems to impact student learning and behavior the most. Carrell (1997) conducted a study on empathy in the classroom to identify how students can develop empathy in communication courses. She used two communication courses in the study, one hybrid class that combined interpersonal communication and public speaking, and one mass media communication course. She used other sections of these courses as control groups. In the mass media class she had the students do an assignment where they were required to complete a video project on a diversity related topic. In the hybrid course, she had the interpersonal communication students complete several in class activities that focused on empathy and diversity, and she had the public speaking students prepare one speech on a diversity related topic. The student's empathy was measured at the outset of the class and again at the conclusion of the semester. Carrell found that having the students do a one-shot assignment had no effect on student empathy but that students that engaged in multiple empathy activities showed significant

gains in their empathy scores. Carrell invited educators and instructors to consider the pedagogical application of her study, namely, that to develop empathy in students, instructors need to incorporate multiple activities and assignments that require students to consider the views and feelings of others, rather than hoping to achieve this by giving them a single assignment. She acknowledged that her research was only a starting point for further research in how communication courses can be used to facilitate empathy learning and development in students.

In light of all of this, my research is an attempt to build on Carrell's (1997) method of using communication courses to facilitate empathy development and growth. Where Carrell quantitatively measured students' empathy levels given empathy instruction, as the method section will show, I chose to qualitatively explore students' understanding of empathic communication by looking at how empathy instruction, experiential learning, and empathy journals influence student learning of empathy over the course of a semester. Adding to this growing body of research in higher education is important because of the critical developmental stage most undergraduate students are in when they enter the classroom. Thus, using undergraduate students for this study provides a special glimpse into a collective group of people that are in a pivotal stage of learning and development. The following section will draw on the literature around student development and learning to support this rational.

Student Development and Learning

Because empathy is a concept that can be taught as a skill or a cognitive concept, it invites those interested in teaching it to consider their pedagogical approach. According

to Hoffman (2000), it takes a mature individual to develop a deeper understanding of empathy and the ability to enact it with relational and emotional intelligence. Thus, while teaching empathy can be beneficial to people of all ages (Levine, 2012), teaching it to young adults can be particularly impactful because of the stage of development they are entering.

Beginning in the 1960s, researchers interested in learning and growth in higher education began to draw on the works of Dewey (1938), Piaget (1955), and Erikson (1959) to conduct research and create theories of student development. Since then, many student development theories have emerged (Evans, Forney, Guido, Renn, & Patton, 2010). As a result, a core concept of student development theorizing is the notion that educators need to recognize that the majority of students who occupy the chairs of higher education courses are not only individuals learning academic concepts, but are human beings at a pivotal stage in their overall life development (King, 2009). Researchers have long noted that adolescence is a time of "identity crisis" for most individuals, where they engage in highly egocentric behaviors and struggle to negotiate new relational and social dynamics (Tennant & Pogson, 1995). However, as teens move into early adulthood, they enter a maturation period where they begin to find a balance between the need for a unique identity and defining themselves in terms of their relationships with others. For this reason, when a young adult enters an institution of higher learning, their social, emotional, physical, spiritual, and mental growth are extremely important, as they will forge identities and life strategies that will often persist throughout the rest of their lives (Baxter Magolda, 1999).

When educators recognize the pivotal role they play in helping young adult

students forge new ways of being and relating, in addition to the academic knowledge students are acquiring, they open themselves up to using a variety of pedagogical approaches to teaching and learning in the classroom. Levinson (1986) identified the early adult transition years falling between the ages of 17-22 years old. He believed that these years were vital to an individual's development and advocated that the role of educators during this period is to "both challenge old perspectives and support the acquisition of new perspectives" (Kitchener & King, 1991, as cited in Tennant & Pogson, 1995, p. 130). This emphasis on helping students develop perspective taking, as has been pointed out earlier in this literature review, is a foundational aspect of empathy development. Thus, helping students understand the importance of empathy and develop the ability to apply it to their lives, strikes at the roots of student development. In addition, research has shown that students who develop their empathic abilities in their young adult years are more likely to enjoy greater personal and relational success as they transition into the adult years (Goleman, 1995). For these reasons, understanding how to help young adult students develop empathy at the university and college level is an important part of their development and maturation process.

In addition to the life stage theories of students' development articulated above, there are two major alternative models that invite educators to consider when thinking and theorizing about adult education. These are life events theory and life course theory. The first of these, life events theory of human development proposes that it is more productive to think of human development occurring across the life span of an individual, rather than tying it specifically to age-related stages (Tennant & Pogson, 1995). The research backing up this theorizing has often focused on gender differences. For example,

Caffarella and Olson (1993) found that the developmental stages of women are often less linear than men's because of the drastic changes that often accompany their roles, such as motherhood. One implication here for student learning in higher education is the increasing numbers of women coming back to college or universities following divorce, child-rearing, or because of the need for a second income (Pusser et al., 2007). The development of these students can be just as pivotal for their life growth as those who are in the plasticity of early adulthood. Moreover, the life course theory of human development invites researchers and educators to consider that life development is contextual and dialectical in nature in that individuals are constantly learning and changing as their relationships and the environment and society they are embedded in change (Tennant & Pogson, 1995).

Regardless of the developmental theory one prefers, the body of research that has been collected in this area demonstrates the importance of developing effective methods for teaching empathy at the university level, not just K-12. Unfortunately, this area of empathy research is lacking. Lam, Kolomitro, and Alamparambil (2011) conducted an extensive review of the literature on empathy training and instruction and found only 29 studies in the last 20 years, 9 of which were conducted in the last 10 years pertaining to empathy training and instruction. These authors noted that this limited amount of research has left us with more questions than answers on how to teach empathy effectively. More recently, Bouton (2014) undertook a similar literature review and noted that there was a serious lack of studies "attempting to determine how and if empathy can be taught" and posited that an essential need of the academic community is for more rigorous research on the methods of empathy instruction and their outcomes (p. 21).

Again, the purpose of my study is to do just that, which is to add to the conversation on empathy instruction in higher education by capturing the learning experience of students during a pivotal stage in their development. One of the primary ways my research will do this is through employing experiential learning methodologies. As a result, it is necessary to provide a deeper understanding of experiential learning in this literature review.

Experiential Learning

The promulgation of the importance of experience in education is not a new debate and traces its roots far back to the days of Plato and Isocrates. For centuries, scholars and philosophers have argued about the utility of experience in knowing and learning. Historically, those who adopted the rationalist perspective argued against information that is garnered through an individual's senses, rather than a through logic or reasoning. Conversely, empiricists have advocated that knowledge, even abstract concepts, are only discovered as they are experienced through the senses. Kant (1787) was one of the first to argue that both rational and empirical faculties are important in the learning process, as we rationally make sense of the world we experience. Building on the work of Kant and other philosophers, the great pragmatist thinker John Dewey (1938) became the primary champion of experiential learning.

As an educational reformer, Dewey advocated for a pedagogy that promoted learning through doing, or experiential education. He believed that through problematizing various aspects of education and then affording students the opportunity to have experiences in trying to solve the problems posed, students reached greater levels of reflection and learning (Dewey, 1938). However, Dewey made a clear distinction on

what types of experiences would be considered educative. He posited:

> The belief that all genuine education comes about through experience does not mean that all experiences are genuinely or equally educative …. Any experience is mis-education that has the effect of arresting or distorting the growth of further experience …. A given experience may increase a person's automatic skill in a particular direction and yet tend to land him in a groove or rut; the effect again is to narrow the field of further experience. (pp. 25 - 26)

From this philosophical position, Dewey believed that only those experiences that led to further growth to the individual and their active role in the community would qualify as experiential education. He sought to advance democratic processes in schools that allowed students to be active and reflective in their education. Because of this, it was important to Dewey to consider how educators structured experiences for students. He felt that experiences needed to have a level of authenticity to them that would compel those involved to feel that they had a genuine experience rather than a contrived one that merely scratched at the veneer of learning. Thus he posited, "Experience in this vital sense is defined by those situations and episodes that we spontaneously refer to as being 'real experiences'; those things of which we say in recalling them, 'that *was* an experience'" (Dewey, 1934, p. 275). Furthermore, Dewey believed that for experiences to have a level of authenticity to them, they must connect on a pragmatic level, intellectual level, and emotional level.

Many of Dewey's assumptions about the value of experiential education have been supported by the work on cognition, development, and language done by Piaget (1955) and Lewin (1948). Building on the work of these theorists, scholars have taken these concepts and constructed models and paradigms for learning based on experience; the most notable of these is David Kolb (1984). The work conducted by Kolb has helped to distinguish the difference between experiential learning and experiential education.

Experiential learning is a term that is broadly used in education and psychology and has taken on multiple meanings and obfuscating definitions, some of which often become conflated with experiential education. Kolb (1984) has defined experiential learning as "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (p. 38). This is a broad definition which encapsulates many of the ways various other scholars and psychologists have used the term (Moon, 2013). At its most basic level, it describes learning that individuals achieve because of their experiences. However, Kolb (1984) conceptualizes experiential education as the process whereby instructors design experiences for their students that will meet specific educative learning outcomes. This is an important distinction as it explicates the necessity of a conscious instructor to guide the experiential processes. If a teacher simply conducts an activity or game in their classroom without a clear educative purpose in mind, they have not achieved experiential education. However, some students may have the awareness to learn from the activity, in which case experiential learning would have taken place. To help educators understand experiential learning, Kolb (1984) developed a model that instructors can use to ensure that learning has actually occurred (Figure 1).
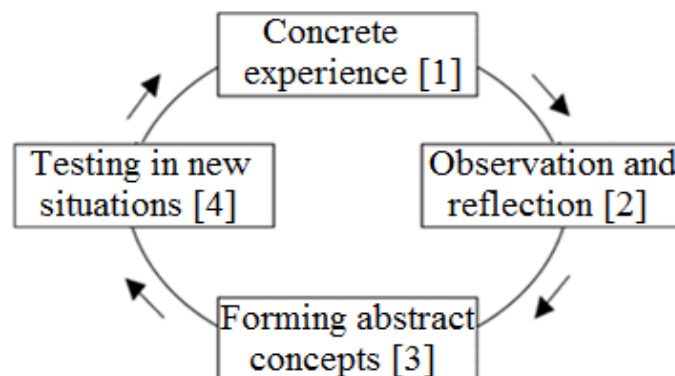

Figure 1: Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle

One of the challenges posed by educators who employ experiential learning in their classrooms is finding ways to properly assess the actual learning that has occurred (Katula & Threnhauser, 1999). While there are different approaches to doing this, one of these is through reflective journaling (Moon, 2013). This is largely because research on journaling has afforded scholars and clinicians a better understanding of how skill development and the acquisition of dispositional characteristics are fostered in individual's behavioral and cognitive efforts (King & LaRocco, 2006). Furthermore, research on learning in higher education found that when instructors provide guided reflective journaling for students, they are able to access the way students' perceptions and understanding of concepts change overtime (Dunlap, 2006).

Consequently, there is precedent for using a journal approach to teach empathy, particularly in the medical field. For example, Chabon and Lee-Wilkerson (2006) conducted a study about medical students' ability to achieve the desired learning outcomes of diversity training. They had students keep reflective journals throughout the semester to track their thought process related to the concepts being discussed in the class. At the end of the study they noted, "what we found was that students produced many more descriptive and empathic reflections throughout the semester than analytic and metacognitive reflections" (p. 156). Thus, they were able to see how and in what ways the course content and experiential learning provided facilitated a greater empathic perspective in students.

The work of Chabon and Lee-Wilkerson (2006) illustrates that the use of journaling can be an effective way to access the empathic learning students achieve over a period of time. However, their work only scratches the surface on the different ways

experiential learning journals can be used in a classroom. As the methods section will show, my study has sought to extend this line of research by using empathy journals in a variety of ways throughout the course of a semester. This should prove to be an important addition to the research on experiential learning and journaling, particularly as it relates to empathy learning and instruction.

<u>Summary</u>

The literature review provided in this chapter has provided an outline of how empathy has been studied in the academic community broadly and more specifically in the communication field, as it relates to empathic communication behaviors and empathic collaborative communication. It has also looked at the trajectory of empathy education and the importance of empathy development and instruction. While the case for the following study was built along the way, the following is a short summary of the important ways my study will contribute to the growing body of research on empathy and communication.

While the topic of empathy dates back to antiquity, the concept as we have come to know it today has really only been rigorously studied for a little over 60 years. To date, there is a great deal of disagreement about what the borders of empathy research should be and how to define it. Overall, researchers tend to see empathy as containing cognitive and affective elements. However, there is a growing voice inviting the academic community to consider a third important characteristic of empathy, namely communication. Consequently, because this notion has escaped many of the definitions and theorizing about empathy, there is a strong need to explore empathy from a

communicative standpoint. Unfortunately, communication researchers have been slow to join the conversation. Despite the intuitive connection between empathy and communication, to date only 25 articles that specifically focus on empathy (i.e., empathy is in the title of the article) have been published in seven of the most prominent communication journals over the last 40 years, those journals being: Communication Quarterly, Communication Research, Western Journal of Communication, Communication Research Reports, Southern Communication Journal, Communication Studies, Communication Education, and Communication Monographs. While these 25 articles provide useful additions to the ever expanding knowledge base on empathy, the mere fact that only a third of these articles have been published in the last decade shows that the communication field still has much to offer to the collective discourse on empathy. My study is designed to do just that in a number of ways.

First, this study will look at the communicative behaviors that make up empathic interactions as reported by participants in those interactions. While this topic has been examined by researchers, there is a discrepancy over the impact of verbal and nonverbal communication on generating feelings of empathy. In addition, the vast majority of the research that has looked at empathy behaviors has been conducted in clinical settings, specifically in psychology and healthcare. This has left a need for additional research on the perception of empathic behaviors outside of those contexts. My study was designed to fill that need by asking students to identify empathy behaviors in their everyday lives. Furthermore, the growing body of research on empathy and communication has focused on empathy as a linear process rather than a transactional one. While a few communication researchers, i.e., Bennett (1981), Stewart (1983), Broome (1991), and

DeTurk (2001), have attempted to move empathy theorizing beyond cognitive-centric linear models, this line of thinking has been largely ignored in by the academic community and the communication field as it relates to empathy research. As a result, there is a strong need for research that explores the way empathy is co-created and jointly produced in dynamic ways. Throughout my study, I hope to fill that need and bring added complexity to the notion of empathic communication by tracking the longitudinal learning students achieve throughout the course of a semester.

By exploring empathy in this way, my study will also further the need for more research on empathy instruction. While many techniques and methods have been developed about how to teach empathy, scholars have acknowledged that more research needs to be done, particularly in higher education. With the new emphasis being placed on holistic education, experiential learning, and student development, my study is meant to expand the narrative on how educators can foster empathy learning and growth in students. Ultimately, this exploration should be pivotal in moving us toward developing a deeper understand of empathic communication and empathy instruction. Based on this literature review, the specific questions that guided this research project are as follows:

Research Question 1: What are the communicative behaviors and patterns that facilitate feelings of empathy in the lived experiences of a group of students?

Research Question 2: In what way can empathy instruction, from a communication standpoint, shape students' understanding of empathic processes?

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODS: USING GROUNDED THEORY

TO EXPLORE EMPATHIC COMMUNICATION

The previous chapter showed that research on empathy has largely been studied in

the fields of medicine and psychology, which have privileged the use of quantitative

methodologies within limited settings. While this large body of research has provided

many important insights into empathy as a cognitive and affective phenomenon, it has

also left considerable room for greater exploration of how communication plays a pivotal

role in empathy production and maintenance. As a result of this, my study has been

designed to engage in such an exploration by approaching empathic communication from

a qualitative perspective. By adopting an interpretive approach, I am heeding the call of

Bennett (1980), Stewart (1983), Broome (1991), and DeTurk (2001) and expand the

dialogue on empathy by examining the way transactional communication co-creates

feelings of empathy. The data for this inspection were the result of empathy journals kept

by students over the course of a semester. Using a constructivist's approach to grounded

theory, the journal entries selected for this study were analyzed to unpack the way the

student's learning and experiences formed and transformed their understanding of

empathy and communication. Just as Chabon and Lee-Wilkerson (2006) utilized

journaling in their study on medical students' ability to achieve outcomes of diversity training, so too did I use student journaling as a means of capturing students' cognitive developments surrounding empathic communication. Therefore, the backbone of this research project was to explore the process of sense making for individuals involved in a set of instructional experiences as it relates to empathic communication. In the following section, this process will be explicated with greater depth; however, before delineating that process, I feel it is important to provide a brief commentary on my epistemological position to help the readers of this document understand my academic identity.

When I started graduate school, I identified myself as a postpositivist researcher who subscribed to quantitative research methods in order to understand the "truths" of effective classroom instruction. I operated with the assumption that the key to being a worthy teacher was by following "proven" theories that were built through hypothesis testing. However, during my time in graduate school, I was forced to face new realities and in some cases deeply personal realities. The details of this are not necessary for this dissertation but suffice it to say that one of the major contributing factors that made me question my assumptions about life came when, as a graduate student, I lost the three closest relationships in my life to tragedy and death. These experiences caused me to value relationships as I hadn't previously in my life and I turned my academic focus from instructional communication to interpersonal communication in order to spend my academic career helping people build and sustain meaningful connections.

As a postpositivist I then sought to understand the "truths" that created strong connections through communicative behaviors. Consequently, the deeper I got into the interpersonal communication research and the deeper I invested into the relationships in

my life, the more I realized that there was no one right way to engage in relationships. In fact, I found myself increasingly frustrated with the lack of interpretive research done in the body of research on interpersonal and relational communication. I slowly began to align myself with a constructivist epistemology and I adopted the view that healthy relationships were the result of unique collaborative meanings and relational dynamics that get co-created through communication. Thus, my research paradigm changed from trying to discover the covering laws of effective communication in relationships, to exploring and understanding the idiosyncratic and multiple realities that seemed to foster meaningful connections. I believed that writing about these realities would enlarge the discourse on relational communication and help people socially construct and foster meaningful relationships. Based on this journey, I became a constructivist and choose to do interpretive research that explored the inimitable experiences of individuals. This process helped me in the creation of this study and guided me to adopt a constructivist approach to grounded theory as a methodological structure.

A Constructivist Approach to Grounded Theory

Central to any research project, a researcher must select a research paradigm that is consistent with their ontological beliefs about the nature of reality. As a constructivist, I align myself with those who support the idea "that realities are social constructions of the mind, and that there exist as many such constructions as there are individuals (although clearly many constructions will be shared)" (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p. 43). I am most interested in the way these shared realities get produced through communicative processes and their implications for how individuals relate to one. In speaking about how

scholars can use this ontological perspective to drive the epistemological choices they make in their research, Hacking (1999) points out that the primary goal of social constructionist research is to explore the phenomenon that society often sees as inevitable or fixed, in order to highlight aspects of the phenomenon that are taken for granted or have been left unexamined. The literature review in the previous chapter demonstrated that the very notion of empathy, as a concept, is socially constructed with researchers in a variety of fields lobbying for differing definitions. However, it was also shown that the concept of empathy is largely seen as simply a cognitive and affective phenomena thus leaving many of its communicative dynamics unexamined. From my academic perspective, I believe that these communicative aspects of empathy warrant attention because of the relational implications they have.

Grounded theory has its roots in phenomenology in that it values the lived experiences of individuals and the way those experiences shape their actions (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Thus, at the most basic level, the methodology of grounded theory seeks to build theories based on peoples' understanding and experiences (Glaser, 1978; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). As an interpertivist researcher, I crafted a study that valued the experiences of students by having them keep journals throughout the semester. By analyzing the journal entries of students, I was able to access insight into the emotions, constraints, negotiations, and learning moments that students experienced as they used journaling as a way to understand empathy and how it relates to communication. However, grounded theory has evolved over time, causing ontological and epistemological fragmentations along the way (MacDonald & Schreiber, 2001). Mills, Bonner, and Francis (2006) noted that over time, Glaser and Strauss, the authors

attributed as the creators of grounded theory, have adopted different epistemological perspectives on the nature of grounded theory research. These authors point out that while traditional grounded theorists subscribe to discovering "truths" that emerge from the data that represent a "real" reality, Strauss has clearly stated that he does not believe in a pre-existing reality "out there," and thus adopts a relativist ontological position that "truth is enacted" (Strauss & Corbin, 1994, p. 279). It is this position that has carved a place for grounded theory to cross-pollinate with social constructionism.

According to Denzin and Lincoln (2000), grounded theory from a constructivist approach can be a powerful way to descriptively explore the way individuals construct their own understanding of experiences in the learning process. Utilizing a grounded theory interpretive approach afforded me the ability to code and categorize the journal entries in a way that allowed meanings to organically emerge from the data. Thus, I was able to inductively explore some of the underappreciated communicative aspects of empathy that have been ignored by many empathy researchers. Consequently, because the theoretical stance I adopted framed the interpretive and analytical decisions I made throughout my application of grounded theory methodologies, it seems appropriate to begin this chapter by making explicit how the theoretical lens I used for the study worked in concert with the methodologies that guided the research process. This theoretical stance was symbolic interactionism.

Theoretical Perspective: Symbolic Interactionism

The theoretical perspective that was used to guide the data collection and analysis process was Symbolic Interactionism. This perspective was selected because of the

multifaceted way it views the sense making process of communication. As one that

studies interpersonal relationships, the definition of communication that I espouse

focuses on the meanings that get produced when individuals interact with one another. I

ascribe to a position that *communication is the process by which humans use symbols to*

co-create and negotiate their social realities. This definition is a blending of a few

different definitions in the interpersonal field but lands me in the constellation of scholars

who believe communication, at its core, involves the way humans form meaning and

structure in communicative interactions with others. As a result of this, symbolic

interactionism is the communicative theoretical framework with which I align most

closely. This theoretical perspective is founded on several premises that guided the way I

approached the data from an interpretive perspective. According to Blumer (1969), the

three major premises of symbolic interactionism are:

1. Human beings act toward things on the basis of the meaning that things have
   for them.
2. The meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social
   interaction that one has with one's fellows.
3. These meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretive process
   used by the person in dealing with the things he encounters. (p. 3)

Looking at these premises, Blumer (1969) points out that the symbolic

internationalist position differs in the way it conceptualizes how meanings are generated,

when compared with other common ways of attributing meaning. The crux of this

distinction rests in the belief that meanings are not tied to objects. Charmaz (2014)

articulates this difference in this way:

> Instead of assuming that the meaning of an object emanates from this object
> itself, as if the meaning is intrinsic to it, symbolic internationalists assume that
> people form meanings from what they do with the object. Meanings are tied to
> practice. (p. 271)

Based on this foundational idea, that people construct and reconstruct new meanings

through acting in social ways, it can be insightful to use symbolic interactional tenets to explore the way individuals make sense of their experiences. As discussed previously in Chapter 2, Broome (1991) and DeTurk (2001) support this theoretical shift focusing on the ways symbols create shared meaning in empathic interactions. This was primarily the reason that my research project focused on having the students keep empathy journals. While analyzing the journals, I was constantly applying the core concepts of symbolic internationalism to further understand and value the unique perspective of the students, and the way in which they created meanings from their experiences. Some of these foundational concepts are as follows.

Subjectivity

  According to Mead, who is viewed as the founder of symbolic interactionism, meanings are located within people but are constantly changing based on the interactions between people (Mead, 1934). Thus, in order to fully appreciate the use of symbols in a communicative situation, a scholar must be willing to attempt to understand the way an actor is making sense of the symbols being used. This understanding warrants looking at relationships organically, recognizing that meanings are constantly changing based on new interactions and new ways of relating to others. Coming from pragmatist roots, Mead's thinking on symbolic interactionism shares many of the theoretical assumptions of Dewey's notions of experiential learning. In the previous chapter, it was pointed out that experiential learning values the subject positions of each student and the unique and organic learning process that they experience (Kolb, 1984). As a result of this viewpoint, it is essential for a researcher to take into account that people act towards others and

make decisions in accordance with *their subjective understandings in any given situation*.
These subjectivities are the basis of symbolic interactionism, and highlight the
importance of context in looking at social realities and relationships.

Interpretation

From an interactionist's perspective, interpretation is paramount in making sense
of the way actors read and respond to the communicative behaviors of others. Mead,
often referred to communicative acts and behaviors as gestures and preferred to look at
them through participants' interpretation of the interaction (Mead, 1934). This is
particularly important when looking at the way meanings and interpretations change over
time, based on interaction in interpersonal relationships. In describing this position,
Blumer (2004) notes, "The interpretation of the gesture, that is, determining its meaning,
frees the human being from making a fixed response to the presentation of the gesture"
(p.20). In essence, those interested in looking at relationships from an interactionist view
point must seek to understand the interpretations that a person is placing on the
communicative behaviors of others, within the contextual parameters of the interaction,
while acknowledging that the working models of a person's world view will change
based on further experience.

Role-Taking

One of the primary reasons symbolic interactionism is a nice fit in studying
empathy is its foundational concept of role-taking. Interactionists believe that individuals
create and negotiate their social identities by assuming the perspective of others and

imagining how they would appear to others. This role-taking process emerges through the collective experiences and interactions individuals have with those in their social worlds, particularly those who play significant roles in a person's life, i.e., significant others (Blumer, 1969). Many researchers interested in empathy argue that role-taking is central to the ability to communicate empathically with an "other." Thus, the function or role-taking in symbolic interaction provides a deeper layer of insight in the study of empathy. This layer includes looking at how an empathic interaction influences the identity construction of the individuals involved. In addition, it accounts for the profound influence that significant others can have on developing interpretations of self and other through repeated interactions and joint experiences.

Social Act

Symbolic interactionism is a grand theoretical perspective that involves layered explanations of the way humans construct meaning and behave in a social world. However, the core process that binds these layers together is a concept Mead entitled the "social act" (Mead, 1934). The social act is comprised of three intertwined phenomena that, according to interactionists, can't be studied separate from each other. These three components are: the gesture of one person, the response to the gesture, and the result that the interaction has for the individual or individuals involved (i.e., the meaning and significance that each party places on the communicative event). Similar to phenomenologists, interactionists are interested in the experiential way individuals make sense of their worlds based on the varied social acts they encounter. Indeed, these are the very building blocks of society for symbolic interactionists. The patterned behaviors and

interpretation of those behaviors are the elements that create, sustain and modify the structures of any society and any relationship. This is an exciting theoretical position for communication researchers because it places communication as central to understanding society, relationships, and an individual's behavior in any given context. Ultimately, symbolic interactionism posits that our humanness must be understood as social beings relating to the symbols we create through interaction with others.

While there are other elements of symbolic interactionism that could be explicated, the preceding list should be sufficient to show how this theoretical framework aligned very nicely with the trajectory of my research study. Now I will provide the necessary details about the research process and the methodology of the study.

<u>Research Design</u>

<u>The Site</u>

At the outset of the study, I decided to look at students' understanding and learning of empathy and communication over the course of a semester. To accomplish this, it was necessary to select a course in which students would be able to complete empathy journals for 15 weeks and receive empathy instruction and experiential learning experiences over the course of a semester. The most efficient way for me to achieve this was to create my own course that gave me control of the curriculum and the academic experiences of the students who signed up for the course. Therefore, I approached the department and received permission to create my own class.

The course I created was a 3 credit upper division course that met for 3 hours 1 night a week. I named the course "Real-ationships and Emotion." It was listed in the

department catalog as Communication 3110, identified in the University of Utah catalog

as: "Interpersonal Communication, Special Topics," and described as "Understanding

different perspectives and issues in interpersonal communication. Topics vary. May be

taken three times for credit." See Appendix A for the syllabus of the course. Because it

was listed as an upper division class, the course required students to take Communication

2110 (Interpersonal Communication) as a prerequisite. This allowed me to forgo teaching

a breadth of interpersonal communication theories, as is the goal of Communication

2110, and rather, to focus on fewer theories that aligned better with my focus. As noted in

Appendix A, that focus, i.e., the course objectives, was stated as follows in the syllabus:

> This class will seek to raise your level of awareness in many areas and aspects of your personal and relational life. Using positive psychology (with a particular emphasis in socio-psychological principles) and relational and communication theory, students will examine the role that emotions play in the development and maintenance of intimate relationships. In addition, students will assess various communicative behaviors and dynamics that are common to intimate relationships from a system's theoretical framework. Lastly, students will be required to apply the insights gained into their lives in order to create a healthier view of themselves and develop stronger, more enjoyable connections with the people in their life that matter most.

Given this description, students were told that the class would bring in theorizing and

research from positive psychology and psychology to supplement the communication

theories that would serve as the backbone of the class. Rather than having the students

purchase a textbook, the students were given a collection of weekly readings from a wide

variety of authors. These authors provided diverse perspectives on communication in

relationships and the role of empathy. In addition, I supplemented their readings by

lecturing on and creating lesson plans that brought in additional academic voices (see

Appendix A for a full reference list of these readings). To teach relational and

interpersonal communication theory, the students were introduced to the works of W.

Wilmot, E. Rogers, L. Guerrero, L Baxter, B. Montgomery, S. Planalp, and G. H. Mead.

To teach a systems view of relationships the students were introduced to the works of V.

Satir, A. Napier, C. Whitaker, and the research and theorizing of the Palo Alto Group. To

teach relational communication theorizing from the field of psychology, the students

were introduced to the works of J. Gottman, C. Rogers, P. Noller, M. Rosenberg, L.

Greenberg, and R. Goldman. To teach relational principles of positive psychology the

students were introduced to the works of E. Denier, D. Meyers, M. Seligman, C.

Peterson, and T. Ben Shahar. Additional research from other fields was also brought in

including P. Palmer (Education), B. Brown (Social Work), D. Stone, B. Patton, and S.

Heen (the Harvard Negotiation Project), and J. Hardwig (Philosophy). While not all of

these authors address the concept of empathy directly, the concepts they discuss provided

ample ground to springboard into activities, discussions, or lectures on empathy. In

addition, various video clips were used throughout the course that provided students with

the opportunity to extend their understanding of empathic communication.

The method of instruction that the course centered on focused on three things.

These were listed on the course syllabus as follows:

To Understand*: We will learn about communication between people by:*
- *Studying* basic communication theory and related theories from other fields
- *Informing* ourselves about a wide-range of research findings

To Apply: We will build our understanding by:
- *Relating* communication processes to the real-world contexts in which they occur
- *Applying* our understandings to events and situations in our own lives

To Practice: We will personalize and enrich our understandings through activities and opportunities to make what we learn more concrete by:
- *Experiencing* the enactment and outcomes of using the concepts we are studying

- *Trying Out* alternatives for communicating with others under a variety of condition

In accordance with these course objectives, each week the students were exposed to a variety of pedagogical methodologies that drew on a mix of activities (both in and out of class), discussions, and lectures. The students' learning and participation was assessed in a variety of ways, including two exams (a midterm and final), one term paper, one group presentation, and journaling (both in class and out of class). The students were then given the option to allow their journals to be used in the study as data. This process will be explained next.

Participants

All of the participants for this research project came from the Communication 3110 – Real-ationships and Emotion class that I created and taught at the University of Utah during the Fall 2012 and Spring 2013 semesters. The enrollment for the course was capped at 40 students, all of whom were required to take the Communication 2110 prerequisite, as mentioned above. However, I made the decision to add a few students beyond the cap and to allow students in the course who had not taken the prerequisite. This decision was made to increase the number of potential journals I could use for this research project and to create a class that was less homogeneous than it would be had I enforced the prerequisite. Thus, after the completion of both semesters there were 86 students who had the opportunity to allow their empathy journals to be a part of the study. Of that number, 74 of them chose to sign the IRB and participate. While the majority of the students in the class were communication majors, there was a subgrouping of students from a variety of other fields, mostly Psychology, Social Work,

and Marriage and Family Development. While the ages spanned between 18 and 65, the majority of the students were between18-35, were Caucasian, and about 65% of the students were female.

It is important to note that because the majority of the students were communication majors in their junior or senior years, they did not begin the class as novices to communication theory. The collective knowledge base they brought into the classroom, no doubt, influenced the data that were collected. For example, had the majority of them not taken any communication classes, their initial understanding of communication as captured in their week 1 journal entries would have most likely been qualitatively different. However, as the research analysis will show, despite the fact that the majority of the students were communication majors, their understanding and working models of communication and empathic communication underwent a substantive change throughout the course of the semester. Because of the design of the class, students were not passive in the learning process and were constantly asked to challenge the concepts being taught based on their lived experience. For this reason, many of the students' journal entries and comments in class were probing and exploratory in nature, seeking to understand deeper applications of course concepts in a variety of contexts and relationships. This made class sessions lively, dialogic, and participatory, as students became familiar with one another and seemed to feel comfortable openly disagreeing or extending each other's thinking. By the end of each semester, many of the students commented that their experience in the class brought a stronger sense of community and fellowship with their peers than any previous class they had taken. This sense of community created an environment where students demonstrated

the ability to bring their whole selves into the learning space in appropriately vulnerable ways.

It should be noted that this research study was conducted at the University of Utah in Salt Lake City, Utah, where the majority of the population belongs to a single dominant religion, which is the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. While I cannot state definitively that this had a direct impact on the research findings, it is important to mention that this religion in particular is one that focuses on ideals of kindness and prosocial behaviors.

Instructor

Because I was the instructor for the course, it is necessary to acknowledge my background and credentials for facilitating the learning in the course. I received my Bachelor's degree in Speech Communication from Utah State University in 2004. Following that, I attended California State University, Sacramento, where I received my Master's Degree in Instructional Communication with a minor emphasis in Interpersonal Communication. Having built a strong understanding and knowledge of the principles behind effective teaching, I decided I wanted to use that to teach Interpersonal Communication. Specifically, I wanted to help people change their lives by changing their relationships and the way they engage and communicate in those relationships in order to create meaningful connections. Thus, after graduating with my Master's Degree in 2007, I was accepted into the Ph.D. program at the University of Utah, taking every interpersonal graduate course I could and supplementing that with relational courses in Positive Psychology. During my time at the University of Utah, I worked as a teaching

assistant in interpersonal communication for a highly respected and experienced

professor and taught several stand-alone courses, including Public Speaking, Introduction

to Communication, Interpersonal Communication, Communication and Relationships,

Small Group Communication, Communication and Conflict, Leadership Communication,

and the Real-ationships and Emotion course that I created, which is being used for this

research study. I have also taught some of these courses as an adjunct professor at other

universities. Consequently, the breadth of teaching each of these classes, as well as my

graduate work, has given me a strong grasp of interpersonal communication research,

which informed my role as the instructor for the course.

In addition to my background as a teacher, I feel it could be beneficial to the

readers of this document to gain a greater understanding of my identity as an instructor

and the core values I adopt in my pedagogical practice. With that in mind, let me say that

I believe that the ideal teacher does not feel that they have arrived at the top of the

mountain of knowledge and are now shouting down all that they know to their students

below. Rather, I think the ideal teacher (one that I strive to be) sees themselves as a

fellow climber, perhaps farther out in front at times, but climbing nonetheless, striving

toward greater knowledge just like their students. I think this perspective facilitates

humility as a teacher, and an openness to learn from their constituents and their students.

As such, I believe that every question by students should be taken seriously, as learning is

the goal of all (including the instructor). However, I also believe that an instructor is there

to teach, and thus should introduce the course material in an engaging way that helps the

students critically assess it and apply it to their lives. As was stated in the previous

section, I believe one of the best ways to accomplish this pedagogical goal is through the

appropriate use of experiential learning. Based on my experience in applying this method of instruction in a variety of different classes, I have found it helps me adapt to the individual needs of the class as well as the nature of the material. It helps me come to know my students throughout a semester and thus affords me the opportunity to find different methods and ways to connect with them based on their learning styles, personalities, and experiences. Thus, I think an effective instructor can vacillate between being the "sage on the stage" when necessary, but being the "guide on the side" as well. Ultimately, I believe students and instructors should be active and engaged in the learning process, not passive or enacting role rigidity by being on auto-pilot.

Researcher

In addition to being the instructor, I was also the principal researcher for the study, which put me in a liminal position. As a qualitative researcher, it is essential for me to explicate my researcher positionality and the role I played in the research process on multiple levels. Speaking on this topic, Pillow (2003) argues for greater precision in qualitative research when it comes to reflexivity by noting that, "most researchers use reflexivity without defining how they are using it, as if it is something we all commonly understand and accept as standard methodological practice for critical qualitative research" (p. 176). In order to avoid such an assumption, I will explicitly state that my definition of reflexivity is based on the Usher and Edwards (1994) notion that reflexivity in qualitative research takes place when the hegemony of written accounts is challenged by providing readers with a way to deconstruct those accounts and realize that they do not "capture" reality, but merely reflect a positioned perspective. In explicating this

positioned perspective, I have adopted Pillow's (2003) definition of self-reflexivity as the guiding influence of this study. She argues that:

> Self-reflexivity acknowledges the researcher's role(s) in the construction of the research problem, the research setting, and research findings, and highlights the importance of the researcher becoming consciously aware of these factors and thinking through the implications of these factors for her/his research. In this way, the problematics of doing fieldwork and representation are no longer viewed as incidental but can become an object of study themselves. (Pillow, 2003, p. 179)

Adopting this definition requires me to explore the way my identities, agency, and the power I carried influenced the study throughout. This is no easy task because the liminal position I was in as the instructor and researcher made it hard to see clearly how my historical and social immersion in the research influenced the study in nuanced ways. However, I will now attempt to make these influences transparent by focusing on my positionality as the researcher.

Positionality

According to Mead (1934), one of the primary ways humans learn to make sense of their social worlds is by observing their own social performance as an object, just as they would perceive the behaviors of other people in their worlds, and then reflecting back on their own communicative behaviors in order to make sense of their identity and the socially constructed world around them. Engaging in this self-reflexive activity, as the researcher for this study, has caused me to recognize just how much I influenced the research process of the study. In particular, it forces me to recognize that I was not detached from the process my students went through in participating in the research project, i.e., the 15-week journey to understand empathic communication on a deeper, - more substantive level. Even though as the researcher I was not an active participant in

writing the data sets that were generated by the research questions, I was still intimately involved in the process. As the instructor of the course and the person who facilitated the journey the students undertook, I was not a witness as much as I was a fellow passenger engaging in the lived emotional and intellectual experience of the participants. With each passing week in the semester, as they were emerged in the readings, experiences, and classroom discussions, so too was I. Even though I was responsible for selecting those readings and orchestrating the experiential and dialogic learning that the students lived, I was never removed from the process but was instead an active member in the intellectual community that materialized throughout the semester. While I had already read each of the articles prior to teaching the class, as I reread them again in preparing for each class session, I experienced them anew through the eyes of my students based on the insights they brought into the classroom week after week. This journey not only colored the way I understood the data but it was essential to my analysis of the data.

For example, during my analysis of the second research question, after I had coded the data for week 15, I was able to see the influence of various aspects of the class that seemed to be meaningful for the students as demonstrated in their definitions, as will be evident in Chapter 5. This helped me more fully grasp that I was primarily facilitating the instructional experience that shaped the students' understanding of empathy and communication, and in acknowledging that I am also acknowledging that I was in a privileged position of power that directly influenced the participants in the study. This concession means that their definitions in week 15 were also a reflection of my own understanding and definition of empathic communication. Just as the cooking range of a sous chef is largely a reflection of the techniques and recipes taught to them by the chef,

so too my students' perspective of empathy and communication were by and large limited to the conceptual contents of the course that I selected. Without question their week 15 definitions would have looked different had they taken the course from another instructor. It would have also been different had I exercised my agency and used alternative pedagogical methods or introduced them to different authors or theories about empathic communication.

While I knew there was no way of getting around this at the outset of the study, I tried to limit my influence by introducing them to a wide variety of readings and perspectives about empathy and communication (as was noted earlier when I delineated the list of authors I incorporated into the course). However, despite my best efforts, during my analysis of the data it became increasing evident just how much I had influenced the educative experience of the students. I was both surprised and humbled to see to what extent the things I said during the class were reflected back to me in the students' definitions and journal entries.

This was sobering for two primary reasons. First, it helped me realize just how much, as a teacher, I can influence the perspective of my students in ways that I didn't fully appreciate in my years being a teacher. But second, and more importantly to this study, I was humbled at how much my identity and power as the researcher and teacher could have influenced the students' definitions. There was no way I could escape the fact that some of the students might have felt compelled to simply provide definitions that they knew would align with my own perspective in order to be seen more favorably by me. Again, I tried to limit this belief in them by assuring them that I would not be grading the content of their journal entries but it is possible that some students could have found

this suspect and thus exercised their agency to try to provide definitions that they perceived would please me by echoing back the ideas that I used throughout the semester.

Furthermore, the majority of the students have learned to navigate school systems where they were rewarded for figuring out what their teachers thought about the course content and then regurgitating that back to the teacher on assignments and exams in order to receive good grades. It is unfortunate that this pedagogical structure often produces a lack of critical thinking in students but it must be acknowledged that in recognizing this dynamic, one of my goals throughout the 15-week course was to encourage the students to critically analyze the contents of the class, as well as my words during the class sessions, in order to *form their own opinions and understandings*. Based on this, all I can do is hope that the majority of the students provided definitions that reflected their own thinking on empathic communication, definitions that were forged in the fires of their own serious thoughts and experiences.

In an essay titled, "Performing as a Moral Act," Dwight Conquergood (1985) posits that qualitative researchers must avoid four problematic performative stances that they can take toward the field community that they are studying. These are: *the custodian's rip off* (where researchers disregard the well-being of the subjects and focus solely on collecting the data to get the project done); *the enthusiast's infatuation* (where the researchers mistakenly believe that they are just like their subjects and thus superficially identify with them in ways that limit their perspective); *the curator's exhibitionism* (where a researcher over emphasizes the differences between them and community members, often romanticizing their subjects); and finally, *the skeptic's copout* (where a researcher believes they are unable to engage with the subjects because their

culture is inaccessible). I found myself struggling with some of these tensions.

Because I was a member of the classroom and learning community, it was difficult at times for me to avoid falling into the enthusiast's infatuation role. This was particularly challenging when analyzing the data because it required me to avoid filtering the words of the students through my own perspective and experiences in the class. For example, when a student wrote about having empathy for the self, my immediate response was to frame this idea in the way that I introduced the concept to the class, operating from the assumption that this was the way "we all learned" about this concept. However, upon deeper reflection and taking a more rigorous look at what the student actually wrote, I had to step back and realize that they were articulating a conceptual understand of self-empathy in a way that moved them beyond the way we learned about it as a community. Thus, as the researcher, I had to avoid the enthusiast's infatuation role by filtering the journal keepers experience through my own excitement that the students latched onto a concept that I introduced to the class in a certain way.

The tension of how much to identify with my students was ongoing. While I wanted to try to respect the differences in their classroom experiences, the truth remains that I was a member of their learning community and intimately involved in the journey they took throughout the semester. In the end, I realized that rather than trying to distance myself from this while wearing my researcher hat, I simply needed to own this and use it to help inform my analysis. Thus, in the chapters that follow, there will be places in my analysis where I attempt to avoid adopting the role of the skeptic cop-out or the curator exhibitionist by informing my analysis as one that could identify with the learning community that produced the journal entries. Ultimately I grew to appreciate

Conquergood's (1985) recommendation for avoiding the four problematic performative

stances, that is, to adopt a stance of "dialogical performance" where the researcher and

subject are in an ongoing state of tension, challenging each other in an attempt to

negotiate the dialectics of identification and difference, and detachment and commitment.

Conquergood (1985) explains the dialogical performance stance in this way:

> It is a kind of performance that resists conclusions. It is intensely committed to
> keeping the dialogue between performer and text open and ongoing. Dialogical
> understanding does not end with empathy. There is always enough appreciation
> for difference so that the text can interrogate, rather than dissolve into, the
> performer. . . More than a definite position, the dialogical stance is situated in the
> space between competing ideologies. It brings self and other together even while
> it holds them apart. It is more like a hyphen than a period. (p. 10)

I believe that using a constructivist approach to grounded theory and the

theoretical lens of symbolic interactionism helped me adopt a dialogical performance

stance in that invited me to continuously see the journal keepers as active agents with the

capacity of self-transformation. This thought constantly challenged me to allow the

insights to emerge and re-emerge from the data, rather than from my own perspectival

interpretations of the communal classroom experience and my researcher drive toward

conclusion. Another aspect that aided me in my commitment to keep the dialogue

ongoing between my role as the researcher and the text was my awareness of who I was

writing for, not just those I was writing about. Throughout the writing process I have

constantly found myself struggling with the sense that I was writing for three separate

audiences, the first of these being the academic community (particularly my five

committee members). My constant awareness of this audience shaped the way I

approached and analyzed the data, as I felt the academic gravity to provide rigorous

insight that would be acceptable to this distinguished, yet highly scrutinizing audience.

However, the research I had conducted as a graduate student doing oral histories implored me to consider a second audience, namely to think of what the subjects would say about my representation of them in my writing. This drove my desire to avoid the custodian rip-off mentality of "getting the job done" without giving a great deal of thought as to how my research stayed ethically true to the dignity and perspective of my subjects (Conquergood, 1985). My keen knowledge of this audience implored me to be particularly careful in my writing so that I could show fidelity to the actual words and sentiments of the students. Finally, while writing I was also aware of a third audience, one that perhaps created the most tension for me in the way that I characterized the data. This audience consists of the larger communities of people that I believe will benefit from my research. My awareness of this audience motivated me to explicate insights from the data that would enrich the lives of people "in the streets" rather than just get a stamp of approval from those in the "ivory tower." Ironically, my awareness of this audience acted as both an anchor for my research and a strong wind that would blow me off course if I surrendered to it. Let me explain.

As an interpretivist researcher subscribing to a constructivist's paradigm, the purpose of my research was not to "uncover" the truth about empathy so that I could generalize my findings to larger populations. However, I would not be engaging in this research if I did not believe that the meanings that emerged from the data would not translate into knowledge that had the capacity to influence other communities in a positive way. As a result of this, it was difficult for me while analyzing my data to write in such a way that didn't sound like I was "teaching" my "findings" to a "superaddressee" (Bakhtin, 1986). In fact, in the first few drafts of my analysis chapters,

the chair of my committee was constantly reminding me to avoid writing to that audience, which was difficult for me because of my passion for teaching and my passion to share what I was learning with others. Hence, in the end, I did my best throughout the writing process to stay true to my first and second audience and to remind myself that writing to the third audience is a privilege that will come later, after the necessary rigor and integrity required to see this study through to completion.

In addition to admitting that my role as the students' instructor and my agency over course content and pedagogical methods influenced the research process, I must also recognize that my very being could have affected the perspectives of the students. As a (relatively) young, White male, my identity is implicated in the research process. One thing that I have come to appreciate during my time in graduate school is that as a White researcher, I have the responsibility to acknowledge the privileged system that I belong to and that explicitly exploring that dynamic is worthy of interrogation in any type of research. In addressing this topic, Gordon (2005) states that one of the ways White privilege gets perpetuated is through White researchers choosing to believe that they are colorblind in their research. He explains that "colorblindness is a complex ideology in which White people are taught to ignore race, a stance that ends by re-inscribing existing power relations that privilege White people" (p. 281). Because I have been educated to look for these dynamics as an instructor and a researcher, I tried to create a learning experience that empathically valued multivocality.

As I sit here and reflect on the classroom instruction the students experienced at my hands, I can see where White privilege still went unnoticed by me. In retrospect, I wish I had been more reflexive during the creation and execution of the class, in my

awareness of race. I wanted to introduce my students to a variety of perspectives on empathy, which compelled me to pull in scholarly voices from a variety of fields. However, when I look at that list of authors I introduced the students to, I now realize that nearly every author is White. This does not diminish the theories or research they have done, as many of them have attempted to value multivocality in their own research. However, the fact that they are all White researchers shows a lack of positionality when it comes to race and empathy. I am somewhat comforted by the fact that I did mitigate this somewhat by showing video clips in class that highlight empathy in other cultures (cultures that are historically marginalized in the U.S.), but I can see now that the students could have benefited from hearing scholars of historically marginalized communities write of their experiences and understanding of empathy. In retrospect, I would have made an effort to introduce my students to a wider variety of voices. Consequently, now that I have explored my positionality as a researcher, I turn my attention to the role my research assistants played in gathering the data.

<u>Research Assistants</u>

In order to have structural integrity of the research design and data collection process, four research assistants were utilized throughout the data collection portion of the study. Two of these participants assisted during the first semester and the other two during the second semester. The research assistants were chosen because of the role that they played in the class, namely they were enrolled in teaching mentorships with me and were not students enrolled in the course. Their teaching mentorship was a separate 3 credit course that involved attending each class session and helping the instructor as

needed, leading study groups, helping students with course work, meeting with the instructor outside of class to learn about teaching theory and practice, applying those concepts by teaching portions of the course content under the guidance of the instructor, and writing term papers about their experiences and topics related to teaching. Because the teaching mentees were present in every class session, they agreed to assist with the research study by ensuring that students' journals were collected, recorded, and returned to the students without my handling of them.

It was essential to make sure that the students were held accountable for writing the weekly journals but it needed to be done in a way that afforded me distance from seeing or tampering with the journals in any way. Therefore, the research assistants were instructed to collect the journals at the beginning of each class session and check to see that the students had written (typed) them. The mentees were given strict instructions that they were not allowed to read or grade the journals and all of the students in the course were assured of this at the outset of the class. One of the reasons I decided to have two assistants help out each semester was so that each could hold the other accountable for not reading or tampering with the journals in any way. Once the research assistants had documented the completion of the journals, they would hand them back to the students at the end of each class session, again assuring the students that their entries were private and were not being kept overnight or given to anyone else to read. By using research assistants, the students had further knowledge that their grade would not be influenced in any way by their participation in the study or the content of their journal entries. This point will be explained further in the data collection section below.

Study Procedures

Prior to explaining the study procedure process, it is important for me to note that at the outset of the study I submitted and received IRB approval, thus, the study procedures that I will now describe were in line with the specified agreements for acquiring informed consent as outlined in the IRB.

At the beginning of the semester, I described my project to the students in the course and explained that my research goal was to gain insight into empathic communication and the pedagogy of teaching it from a longitudinal and communicative perspective. Following this, they were told that their participation was completely voluntary and I assured them that I had taken meticulous efforts to ensure that their grades would in no way be influenced by their participation in the study. I informed them they would have the entire semester to consider whether they would be willing to participate, as I wouldn't be passing out the consent forms until the very end of the semester, at which time they could decide whether they would like their journal entries to be included or excluded from the study. Once I had explained the entire process, I answered any questions and concerns that they had and also invited them to email me or talk to me in private at any point throughout the semester if they had additional questions or concerns of any kind about any aspect of the study. The questions that they had in class were basic probing questions about why I was studying this topic, why I wanted to use their experiences to do that, and to what extent would they be compensated for participating. Not having any way to compensate them, I appealed to their desire to help the world develop a greater understanding of empathic communication and talked about how doing so could help improve people's lives and relationships. Having explained the

study thoroughly and soliciting their help, I collected the data in the following way.

At the close of the very first class session, I had them complete their first (in-class) journal entry. I asked them to reflect on their life experiences and knowledge of empathy and to write down their personal definition of empathy and to describe why they thought empathy was important. This entry served as the starting point for their initial understanding of empathy and the role that communication plays in empathy. During the second class session I gave them the handout that detailed the rest of the journal entries that they would be required to write and the dates they were due. The journal entries consisted of a variety of learning exercises. Some asked them to reflect on previous experiences and write about them, some asked them to have experiences outside of the classroom and write about them, some asked them to reflect on in-class experiences and write about them, and some asked them to reflect on the content of course readings or topics and explore their thoughts on the subject in writing. I wanted to give myself multiple options about how to study empathy and communication, thus I asked them to journal about a variety of issues using a variety of approaches. I knew that at the end of the data collection process I would have to zero in on only a few journal entry prompts to explore for this dissertation. After giving them the handout, I briefly explained each of the topics associated with the entries and answered any questions that they had.

For the remainder of the semester the students received participation points for completing each journal entry. They were told that I would not read the entries until the end of the semester, after grades were posted, although at times they were asked to discuss what they had written in class or with other classmates (in discussion groups). As was mentioned above, all of the entries were collected by the research assistants on the

day they were due. The research assistants would then document which students had completed the journal entries in a participation log. The participation log was then given to me at the end of the semester and was factored into their overall participation grade for the course. This process was designed to ensure that I did not physically see or handle the journals until after grades had been posted but it kept the students accountable for keeping up on their journaling. I also choose not to give students feedback on their journals because I want them to write freely and not feel that they were writing to please me or the research assistants.

On the last day of the semester, I asked the students to hand in a hard copy of all of the journal entries they had completed throughout the semester. I also set up a separate email account for the class and asked the students to email me electronic copies of all of the entries that were not hand written in class (they were told at the beginning of the semester that they would be required to submit both hard and electronic copies and thus were asked to keep an electronic copy of each typed document). This was done to afford me the option to analyze the date in either way. I once again explained the purpose of the study and then students were given the consent form and asked to sign it if they were willing to participate and allow their journal entries for the entire semester to be included as data to be analyzed. I had the research assistants collect both the hard copies of their empathy journal entries and the consent forms and place them in two separate folders. This was done to help the students feel secure that I would not be aware of which students had consented to participate and thus their grades would in no way be influenced if they declined participation. They were told that I would not collect or open the folders until after the grades were posted. Consequently, once I had posted their grades I

retrieved the folders from the research assistants and identified which students had signed consent forms. I then separated their journals from those students that opted not to join the study and I began my data analysis.

Data Collection

As was mentioned in the literature review, one of the methods of capturing an individual's experiential learning has been to employ the use of journals (Dunlap, 2006). Research on journaling has afforded scholars and clinicians a better understanding of how skill development and the acquisition of dispositional characteristics, such as empathy, are fostered in individual's behavioral and cognitive efforts (King & LaRocco, 2006). These studies have found that journaling can foster both emotional and relational change (Flinchbaugh, Moore, Chang, & May, 2012). The utility of such an approach, from a research standpoint, is provided in the way journal entries document the individual's thought processes and reactions to the experiences they have. Because scholars have identified empathy as a skill that has both emotive, cognitive, and communicative aspects, it is primed to be taught using the pedagogical philosophy of experiential learning and the methodological approach of journaling (Busby & Gardner, 2008; Curtner-Smith et al., 2006). Thus, based on this line of research, the current study was designed to extract data from journal entries as a way to document the patterns of meaning making related to learning and developing empathy.

As in all research studies, the medium through which the data were collected also influenced the research process. By having the students use journals, I recognize that I received limited access to the actual interactions that the students experienced. With

every methodological choice there are advantages and disadvantages and I made the decision to use journals because I was more interested in the students' perceptions of their interactions, as opposed to viewing the actual interactions. This methodological decision is concurrent with the symbolic interactionist theoretical perspective I adopted for this study, in that I wanted to explore the way *the students made sense of* their transactional empathic communication, rather than the way that I made sense of them by observing them. I also acknowledge that because many of the students wrote their journal entries well after the actual conversations took place, their memories of the empathic interactions would be limited to some degree. However, while some would see this as a problem to my research design and one that would potentially compromise the integrity of the data that the journals generated, I do not feel this way for two reasons.

First, the essential characteristic of experiential learning is for students to reflect on their experiences and draw meaningful conclusions from it, regardless of how much time has elapsed. Based on this, the conclusions that the journal keepers came to during their reflective writing are equally valuable regardless of the distance they put between the experience and their journaling about it. Second, in speaking of how narratives are shaped by memory construction, Choi (2008) has noted that "past events are perceived as narratives that memory continuously remolds," and it is precisely because of this process that researchers should seek to explore how individuals shape and reshape the meanings of their experiences (p. 371). Thus, reflecting the accuracy of what the students experienced is not the focus of my study but rather to examine the reflective narratives that they have remolded in order to draw meaning from those experiences. Based on this, the fact that some students let some time pass could be seen as a strength to the data

because it would reveal which attributes of the interaction actually made the biggest impact on them and stuck in their memory. In this sense, what the students forgot about the interactions in no way diminishes the formation of the narratives they "remembered," that is, the narrativising of that memory (Choi, 2008).

<u>Data Analysis</u>

Consistent with a constructivist approach to grounded theory the journal entries were analyzed in two phases, first using open (initial) coding to glean the data for units of analysis, followed by focused coding to integrate and dimensionalize the data for building theoretical frameworks. Units of analysis were identified and coded in the data based on their connection to the research questions and followed the parameters of initial coding guidelines in grounded theory, namely, the codes were short, simple, and analytic. Thus, there were two waves of coding in order to address both research questions. The first research question of this study focused on exploring the communicative behaviors and patterns that facilitate feelings of empathy in the lived experiences of a group of students. In order to address this question, any statements that reflected the perception of empathic behaviors were coded as a unit of analysis. Examples of this type of coding are found at the beginning of each of the results chapters and provided in Appendix B. It is important to note that these examples demonstrate how opening coding in grounded theory differs from topical or thematic coding in other types of qualitative research. Rather than looking for static descriptions, Glaser (1978) advocates that grounded theorists use gerunds in their initial coding phase, helping the researcher to see actions and sequences as opposed to fixed and static categories. Thus, in Appendix B you'll find

words such as "feeling," "receiving," and "violating," which capture the fluidity and constitutive nature of the data.

Once sections of the data had been coded for units of analysis, comparative methods were used to find similarities and differences (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Rather than clinging to the early initial codes, various coding sessions were compared to look at alternative ways of seeing the data and coding. Careful attention was given to rigorously avoid putting my preconceived ideas in the student's words in an effort to let the codes grow organically from the data, thus preserving the voice and experiences of the journal keepers. Granted, Dey (1999) stated, "there is a difference between an open mind and an empty head," and so I acknowledge that there was no way I could "bracket" my preconceived notions completely, especially because I was a participant in the educative experiences the students were receiving throughout the semester (p. 251). However, what I did try to do was code in a way that reflected the communicative processes the students described in their journal entries. Upon completing the open coding phases, the data were synthesized for greater analytic meaning as the initial codes were sorted and clustered into larger categories. This focused coding process centered on "using the most significant and/or frequent earlier codes to sift through and analyze large amounts of data" (Charmaz, 2014, p. 138). Appendix C provides a table that demonstrates the way the data were scrutinized to represent the strongest themes that emerged from the initial coding and comparative coding process for research question one. Following this example, Appendix D demonstrates the second (and optional) part of focused coding, that of axial coding, which specifies the properties and dimensions of a category (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Appendix E delineates each of the final codes for research question one,

with specific examples from the data.

The preceding coding process was also used to explore the data for research question two, which posed the question: In what way can empathy instruction, from a communication standpoint, shape students' understanding of empathic processes over the course of a semester? Because the focal point of this question rested on exploring the students' working models of empathy and communication longitudinally over 15 weeks, the analysis required two waves of coding. First, the students' definitions of empathy in week 1 went through initial and focused coding, followed by the coding of their definitions for week 15. Examples of how these data sets were coded can be found in Appendix F through K. However, axial codes were not used for the data sets in research question two. Charmaz (2014) has noted that with the transformations and heuristic extensions that grounded theory has undergone and continues to undergo, many researchers adapt the axial coding phase to fit their data or they elect to forgo this detailed level of coding in order to have a broader range of codes with which to build their theoretical structures. Consequently, I made the decision to use axial coding for research question one because I wanted to synthesize the data to isolate specific characteristics and behaviors in order to identify distinctions between categories more clearly (e.g., haptics and kinesics). However, I choose not to use axial coding for research question two based on several rounds of comparative coding. Early on in the initial coding process as I compared data with data, I came to believe that keeping the data free from axial codes would allow me to see the wider assortment of thinking of the journal keepers with greater clarity.

In addition to my coding and analysis, during the data collection process I kept a

journal to capture my experiences of the research process, or more specifically, to "jot down methodological dilemmas, directions, and decisions," while "engaging in reflexivity to avoid preconceiving the data" (Charmaz, 2014, p. 165). I was particularly worried about being "too close" to the data as both the researcher and the instructor for the course (as mentioned above). Thus, I began keeping the journal as a way to gain some perspective on the process and at least attempt to limit my over familiarization with the data. An example of the types of journal entries I wrote during this phase can be found in Appendix L. In this example, one can see how I struggled with my identity as the teacher and the researcher fairly early in my first semester of data collection. After a few class sessions, I could tell that I needed to be extra careful to not impose my own viewpoints too much on the students because many of them seemed eager to please me by echoing my thoughts back to me. In the journal entry, one can see that I was trying to tinker with the class discussions in a way that would limit this dynamic to some degree. Also interesting to note is that at the end of the journal entry I note how I was worried about certain students not engaging in the class the way I was hoping they would. Because of my liminal position, it is easy to look back now and see that my desire to help certain students was both altruistic and self-serving. The teacher in me wanted them to have surrender to the learning process and fully engage so they could get the most out of the educative experience I was trying to create, while the researcher in me wanted them to fully engage so I could get better data to analyze at the end of the semester. More importantly, the journal entry provided demonstrates the process I went through to shape the journal keepers' learning experiences towards my research goals.

Once the data had been collected, I followed grounded theory protocol and began

writing memos to myself throughout the data analysis process. These memos were more

analytic in nature, in comparison to my journal entries. Appendix M provides two

examples of my memos and comparing and contrasting them with Appendix L reveals

the shift in focus. The purpose of the memos was mainly to assist me in actively

developing and shaping my codes, as well giving me the opportunity to informally begin

to shape the theoretical concepts and to clarify the processes and connections that were

emerging from the data. Charmaz (2014) explains that in memo writing, "you construct

analytic notes to explicate and fill out categories," which then serve as the backbone for

theory construction (pp. 163-164). The second memo came right after a watershed

moment in the data analysis process from research question two. I had been struggling

with a way to explain the differences in the students' communicative thinking from week

1 to week 15, beyond applying the fairly obvious transmission-interactional-transactional

communicative models. After examining the patterns that had emerged and talking them

over with my chair, we spawned the idea to see if the theory of Message Design Logic

(MDL) would work to capture the students' shift in thinking. This was a major

breakthrough in the data analysis process. The further I explored this idea, the more I

realized that MDL was a great fit for the type of data I had gathered. Consequently, my

excitement and initial thoughts on using MDL are visible in the memo.

In summary, this chapter describes the epistemological and methodological

underpinnings of my research project. Specifically, I have shown that applying the

theoretical perspective of symbolic interactionism is congruent with the epistemological

methodology of a constructivist's approach to grounded theory. In order to demonstrate

this, I explained that grounded theory, as an interpretive methodology, has undergone

heuristic changes over the last few decades. One of these changes was making the epistemological shift from using it to explain and undercover the "truths" in reality to applying its methodology to explore individual "realities" (Mills et al., 2006). Looking through the theoretical lens of symbolic interactionism afforded me the opportunity to analytically explore those "realities," by understanding how the journal keepers made sense of their own experiences, how meanings changed for them, and how they changed throughout the research process. To further justify the methodological decisions and choices I made throughout the research process, this chapter detailed the research design of the study and the data collection and analysis process. Special attention was given to my position as both the researcher and the instructor for the class, as I identified the way I struggled to negotiate that liminal position.

In Chapter 4, I provide my analysis of the first research question. Specifically, the chapter identifies the communicative behaviors and dynamics that surfaced in the journal keepers' experiences of receiving empathy. Following this discussion, Chapter 5 provides greater depth into the students' learning by addressing the second research question for this study. This chapter explores the way the students' definitions of empathy changed over the course of the semester, specifically as it relates to their understanding of the communicative processes involved in the production of empathy. The foundation of both of these chapters will be on understanding the data through the perspective and lived experience of the students. Using symbolic interactionism as a means to do that, these chapters complicate the assumptions of prior research on empathy and extend our current understanding of empathic communication. These complications and extensions are delineated in Chapter 6.

CHAPTER 4

THE COMMUNICATIVE DANCE OF EMPATHY

The research scope of this project centers on developing a greater understanding of empathic communication, how it is generated, learned, and negotiated through communicative processes. In this chapter, the focus is on gaining insight into how a group of students experienced empathy. In particular, the chapter will explore the communicative themes that emerged from the students' narratives about their empathy experiences. As was highlighted in Chapter 2, the research on empathic communication has recognized specific communication behaviors that have been identified as important to the production of an empathic interaction (Ellingson & Buzzanell, 1999). However, it was also pointed out that this research has almost exclusively limited its analytical scope to two contexts, the fields of medicine and psychology (Wittenberg-Lyles et al., 2012). This has left neglected research on empathy interactions by individuals outside of those two settings. In addition, the research has shown that there is a discrepancy in the extent to which verbal and nonverbal behaviors contribute to feelings of empathy during an empathy conversation (Coran et al., 2010). Based on this, this chapter addresses the question: What are the empathy behaviors and communicative dynamics that produce feelings of empathy in a group of individuals lived experiences of empathy? The

observations in this chapter were generated by analyzing data extracted from empathy journal entries submitted by 74 students enrolled in an upper division communication class. A few weeks into the semester, the students were asked to journal on the following question:

> Think about an interaction you've had where you experienced strong feelings of empathy. What did this exchange look like? What were the specific communication behaviors that the other person enacted that created feelings of empathy in you?

The responses that this question produced were written narratives of a variety of empathy experiences that were generated from a wide variety of contexts and relationships. The scope of these narratives moved the focus outside of the doctor's office and a psychologist's couch. Each of the narratives written by the journal keepers highlighted personal and unique empathy conversations. However, using a constructivist's approach to grounded theory, the journal entries were explored for communicative themes and patterns with symbolic interactionism as the theoretical lens used to guide this process. The rationale and methodology for using these approaches were delineated in the previous chapter. At the outset of the chapter, let me note that the analysis of the data revealed two major themes, which are the importance of sequential communication and the importance of specific communicative behaviors. To help explain these themes, I decided to use a dance metaphor, highlighting that each empathy conversation is a unique dance that also ebbs and flows with patterned movement and behaviors. Based on this, the chapter will be divided into two sections. The first section will explain how the students' narratives pointed to the importance of a critical pattern that initiated the empathy dance. Following this, the second section will identify the specific communicative behaviors (i.e., dance steps) that sustained the empathy dance

throughout. With this as a roadmap, let us move into the communicative dance of empathy by answering the research question: What are the communicative behaviors and dynamics that facilitate feelings of empathy in the lived experiences of a group of students?

<div align="center">Turn-Points and Nexting</div>

As was just noted, one of the primary objectives of this study was to understand the way communication behaviors and patterns manifested themselves in the journal keepers recounting of their empathy experiences. In looking at these elements, one of the communicative phenomena that surfaced in the journals was the importance of turn taking and turning points. Thus, this section of the chapter will be devoted to explaining the way these two communicative concepts facilitating feelings of empathy in the journal keepers' entries.

The concept of turn-taking is not a new concept in communication theory and has been a part of several relational theories (Baxter & Bullis, 1986; Rogers & Escudero, 2004; Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967). The importance of this concept, as it relates to this study, emerged after exploring chronological patterns in the journal keepers' collective narratives. When the students were asked to recall an empathy experience, the way they wrote about their experiences followed a similar format. First, they began their personal story discussing the precipitating event that created distress in their life. This was followed by a brief description of the kind of emotions and psychological discomfort they were experiencing. Then, they would introduce their empathy partner and the role they played in their life. All of this set the background to

describe the student's empathy experience and the communication that transpired in that experience. Following this came the watershed moment. Once the journal keepers had launched into the meat of their narration, i.e., recalling the communicative dance that took place between the two participants, a particular descriptive moment emerged as a common theme in many of the journals. At first I glazed over this moment in an effort to record and code the communication behaviors that the students described. However, upon closer examination of this moment, it revealed itself to be pivotal to what came next in the journal narratives. Furthermore, because it surfaced as a critical step that shaped the larger empathic dance, this moment could appropriately be labeled a turning point.

The observation of turning points has found its way into research on human connection and relational development for decades. Over 50 years ago, Bolton (1961) argued that there were important "turning points" in relationships that serve as transformative moments that changed the nature of relationships in some way. Since that time, scholars have identified various types of turning points in a variety of relationships, including, romantic relationships (Baxter & Pittman, 2001), friendships (Johnson et al., 2004), families (Dun, 2010), professional relationships (Barge & Musambira, 1992), and relationships in the classroom (Docan-Morgan, 2011). In much of this research, turning points have been conceptualized as major events that shape the overall relational definition between people (Baxter & Pittman, 2001). An example of this will illustrate the influence of turning points and bringing greater meaning to the way the journal keepers' narratives revealed the importance of this concept.

In Breshears' (2010) exploration of the way discourse works to create and maintain family identity in gay and lesbian families, several turning points were

identified that helped parents reinforce their nontraditional identity to their children. Using interpretive analysis of in-depth interviews, one of the turning points identified came as a result of a child at school being teased by another child for not having a family with a mother and father. These moments would produce distress in the child, thus giving their parents a chance to engage in a critical dialogue that provided relational definition of their family unit, helping to alleviate the child's concerns. Thus, as Graham (1997) has noted, "Turning points… can be viewed as symbolic interpretations and evaluations of events or circumstances that give meaning and definition to a relationship" (p. 351). However, turning points can also be singular moments within a conversation or interaction that shape the interaction in significant ways. For example, research on conflict has shown that individuals often make a singular comment or express an idea that then launches partners into destructive discursive patterns. Stone, Patton, and Heen (1999) describe this type of turning point in this way, "when we jump into conversations we typically begin inside our story. We describe the problem from our own perspective and, in doing so, trigger just the kinds of reactions we hope to avoid" (p. 148). It is this type of turning point that proved to be salient to the way the journal keepers wrote about their empathy experiences. Collectively, the students' narratives pointed to a pivotal moment, i.e., a turning point that triggered the empathic communication that followed.

This watershed turning point happened when the journal keeper became vulnerable to her/his communicative partner. In some cases, the journal keeper began crying, in others she/he sank into the shoulders of the partner. In these instances the journal keeper described expressing vulnerability in her/his communicative behaviors. In entries that captured an experience of vulnerability, the communicative partner responded

to this vulnerability by using their next communicative turn to make an appropriate empathic response. For whatever reason, perhaps because the relational groundwork had been laid or the situational constraints induced it, the unfolding of the empathy exchange hung in the balance when this level of vulnerability was reached. From the descriptions provided, it is apparent that the journal keeper's experience of empathy hinged on how their communicative partner responded to this vulnerable moment, that is, what they did with their next turn. In several journal narratives this moment came when the distressed journal keeper finally allowed themselves to "break down" in front of the other. This breakdown was identified by a shift to vulnerable communication. Prior to this shift, many of the journal keepers articulated that they communicated in ways that kept people at a distance, masked what their emotions were, and kept their topics of communication on a surface level. Here are some of the examples of the vulnerable communication described by the students.

> *"I honestly collapsed in fear and wondering what was going to happen and felt extremely scared and vulnerable." (B-2)*

> *"I often don't feel comfortable telling people what I am feeling, even something as vague and just being sad, but in this case, I was able to express my emotions to Stephanie without feeling the weakness I normally feel when I talk about feelings." (A-5)*

> *"...just started sobbing to her on the phone. I was completely vulnerable; all the grief, pain, sorrow and anguish of my soul was on the table."(A-34)*

> *"I reached out to a close friend and asked her what I should do." (A-11)*

> *"I didn't want to talk with anyone… I don't have any power to endure my vulnerabilities… I finally told him my failure."(B-1)*

> *"I have always been one to kind of bottle up my emotions. I have always had a harder time showing my feelings, so I don't think that she had ever seen me cry. I was very nervous on what she would think." (B-21)*

From a communicative perspective, this important shift towards vulnerability came when the journal keeper suddenly allowed him/herself to be *seen* and *heard* in a vulnerable way. They let themselves cry in front of the other, opened up about what they were really feeling, fell to the ground or collapsed on the bed, asked for help, expressed their fears, told others what they needed, picked up the phone and made the call, or stopped *"trying to keep everything inside and make it look like nothing was wrong"(B-23)*. It wasn't until I realized that nearly every journal entry recalling their empathy exchange, described such a shift, that I recognized the importance of this communicative turning point. Furthermore, many of the entries above revealed the visceral level of vulnerability some journal keepers felt as they expressed their fear and hesitancy to communicate about their emotions, weaknesses, and failures.

In addition to these journal entries, some journal keepers chose to highlight the strength of their positive empathy experience by contrasting it with an example of a negative empathy experience. These few counter examples further underscored the importance of the vulnerable turning point by revealing the negative dance that was co-created when a would-be empathy partner failed to respond to the shift to vulnerability in a positive way. Here is an example:

> *I was scared to open up to him, because when I opened up to my previous boyfriend, he would shut down or change the subject, making me feel stupid and lonely. It got to the point that I wouldn't even talk about my problems with him because I knew he would never give me empathy when I needed it. (B-14)*

As this example shows, the shift to vulnerability acted as a turning point of disconnection in the relationship she had with her previous boyfriend, effectively shutting down positive communication between the two over important issues and "problems" she was facing. Once again, this response shows the significance of the shift to vulnerability.

Given what the journal keepers describe, the communicative transition that journal keepers made to be vulnerable proved to be an important precursor for the reception of empathy or the catalyst for disconnection depending upon the response of the other. This critical response behavior implicates another communicative principle in interpersonal relationships, a concept called nexting.

Nexting is a term developed by Stewart (2013) to highlight the importance of turn-taking in communication. In his words:

> When you keep in mind that communication is complex, continuous, and collaborative, you'll always recognize that, no matter what happened before and no matter how bad things currently look and feel, you always have the option to try a next step that moves the conversation forward. (Stewart, 2013, p. 56)

Essentially, a nexting mindset encourages communication that values the opportunities to respond in ways that facilitate connection and personal communication, as opposed to impersonal communication. Understanding this concept seems paramount in understanding the communicative nature of an empathic exchange. For the journal writers, when a distressed person finally shifted their guarded communication to one of vulnerability, the very *next* response of the person in the interaction made the difference on whether the author described having an experience of empathy. Ultimately, the communicative partner displayed sensitivity in these vulnerable moments by responding in a way that seemed to invite further vulnerability in the journal keepers. Based on the students' narratives, givers did this in a variety of ways both verbally and nonverbally. For example, notice the way the following journal keeper described her shift to vulnerable communication and the way her counselor effectively nexted, inviting her to participate in the creation of an empathetic experience.

I was about 15 when my mom finally got fed up with my attitude and made me go

see a counselor. The first few sessions were pointless because I didn't want to open to a stranger and I didn't think he cared about what was going on in my life. But putting on this tough persona all the time couldn't last forever. All it took was the right question and the tears just started flowing and my mouth just started talking. He said "so you must think your dad is a pretty shitty dad huh… I mean he was cheating on your mom and made you keep it a secret because you were daddy's little girl?"

I looked at him and he had this look on his face like his dog had just died or something and he just felt so bad for me… I decided to completely open up and I expressed how sad it made me feel to practically grow up without a father now.

The counselor just sat there and listened while I spilled my guts out and I can't even tell you how good it felt. He made me feel that I could tell him anything and he would understand…. After our sessions ended, I felt like this huge burden had been lifted off my shoulders because I no longer felt vulnerable, I felt relieved that I was able to share my inner thoughts with a complete stranger. He seemed to understand that he didn't need to sit there and give me advice on how to deal with my feelings and why I shouldn't bottle them up, but he just felt so much empathy for me that he just let me vent, which is exactly what I needed. (B-13)

This journal entry exemplifies the shift to vulnerable communication that so many of the journal keepers described and it provides a rich example of nexting. For this counselor, his next empathic move resonated with the journal keeper. His verbal and nonverbal nexting invited the student to more fully engage in the empathy dance he was attempting to co-create with her. In this description the counselor nexted by paraphrasing her narrative and then posed a question that invited her to explore her feelings. The journal keeper interpreted these nexting moves as evidence that the counselor was invested in her pain. In addition, his decision to just listen and not give advice was interpreted by the distressed journal keeper as an empathic act. Ultimately, his nexting response to her shift to the watershed moment (i.e., vulnerable communication) was interpreted as honoring her intensely personal feelings in a way that allowed her to feel his concern and engagement in her experience and pain. Her narrative reveals that these nexting behaviors were essential to her decision to perceive the symbolic behaviors he was enacting as empathy.

In the following example the journal keeper describes the pivotal vulnerable moment in her experience and the way her husband nexted, thus collaborating to create what I am calling an empathy dance.

The last time that I felt… pure empathy was when my mother died. My husband and I had only been married for about a year and I don't think I totally showed him who I really was. I still had walls that I had up about certain areas. Her death was so fast and sudden that I didn't understand how to control my emotions and thoughts. I had a lot of hate and loneliness inside of me and I didn't know if that was okay to feel that that. I remember when the doctor told us that she wasn't going to make it.

I went outside in the hallway of the hospital and fell to the floor. My husband came over and scooped me up and just held me there. We both cried for what felt forever. He just kept telling me he was sorry. I remember him looking me in my eyes and telling me that we will get through this. Every single wall I had fell down at that moment. I knew that I needed him. I needed empathy for me. I know that he felt my pain and he felt my loneliness. He knew that he couldn't help me unless he took on my sorrow and understood my pain. That situation really brought us together as a couple. I knew that I could be vulnerable around him. (A-4)

This is another powerful journal entry that highlights the critical nature of nexting in creating an empathy dance following the shift to vulnerable communication, which in this entry was marked by the new wife collapsing in the hallway and crying. Directly after this communicative act by his wife, the husband was faced with a variety of potential ways to respond (i.e., next). For example, he could have thought, "my wife is very emotional right now, I just need to give her some space and privacy to deal with things in her own way." Just as the counselor in the previous example could have thought, "this poor girl is lost, and needs some helpful advice on how to cope with her troubled past." Given the student's descriptions of what *did* happen, it appears that neither of these alternatives would have resulted in an opportunity to collaborate and create an empathy experience. Fortunately, these two men demonstrated the ability to react in a way that respected the moment of vulnerability and took their next turn to

communicate empathy in a way that connected with their partner.

Given the examples above, and the patterns that emerged in the journal entries, the journal keepers revealed the importance of vulnerable turning points and the need to next in ways that invite engagement to co-create an empathy dance. The trajectory of these insights points to a foundational question in the exploration of communicative empathic exchanges. This question is: In the journal entries, what were the specific ways that empathy partners communicatively nexted to create feelings of empathy in the journal keepers? It is this important question that the following section will address.

Empathy Codes

The previous section highlighted the importance of vulnerable turning points and nexting. However, even when an empathy partner recognizes the important shift to vulnerable communication, and hopes to assuage the distress of the other person by nexting with empathy, the journal entries show that creating the empathic dance has just begun. The key to continuing a mutually rewarding dance, is for both dancers to move, in coordination, or to continue the analogy, to move with the music. Consequently, the empathy journals revealed that an empathy dance can quickly fall apart when both of the dancers are hearing different music. Let me explicate this analogy.

From the time we are born, we are taught the rules and norms for communicating in prosocial ways within society, or as Mead would refer to them, "mechanisms of conduct" (Mead, 1934, p. 147). One of the most important ways we are socialized is learning how to manage and deal with our emotions and the emotions of others (Goleman, 1995). Research has shown that our caregivers, in particular, have a strong

influence in creating expectations for how emotive communication should take place (Gottman, 1998). As a result, we carry these expectations into all aspects of our relational life, thus creating connections and disconnections with others, based upon their expectations. Continuing with the dance analogy, these expectations could be seen as the music of our emotive dances with others. When we communicate with someone who operates from the same emotive philosophical subjectivity, we are far more likely to coordinate our steps because we are hearing the same music, or in essence, communicating with the same set of expectations and therefore anticipating what steps should come next given the rise and fall of the melodies. Conversely, when we collide with another who has a differing philosophical position, it is far more likely that we will step on each other's toes as we struggle to coordinate and modify our expectations. While this may be somewhat of a crude analogy, it does support a critical concept that surfaced in the journal entries. That concept is simply this: Journal keepers differed on what they perceived as constituting empathic communication. These differing perceptions revealed that some journal keepers preferred one type of empathic dance, set to a certain type of music, while others preferred a different type of dance, set to a different melody.

Once the concept of differing empathic dances and music emerged from the data, it became necessary to explore the different ways journal keepers interpreted and accepted empathy. The illumination of this idea underscored how problematic it is to assume that all empathic communication is equivalent. The journals revealed that a simple gesture can carry a great deal of empathic weight with one person and have very little impact upon another. Thus, in the following section, categories were created to identify the different communicative ways that journal keepers perceived empathic

communication. I have labeled these as empathy codes, highlighting the importance of

recognizing that the students needed different codes in order to feel empathy. The journal

entries made it clear that not one code or set of codes works in all situations and in most

cases, it is a combination of codes that created the empathic dance.

As was highlighted in the methods section, the categories that surfaced as

distinctive empathy codes did so because of the emotive power they seemed to generate

for journal keepers and the frequency with which they were cited. The emotive power

emerged in the language and phrases used by journal keepers. For example, here are two

phrases from the journals related to haptics. One journal keeper wrote, *"it felt so good to*

just be hugged" (A-22). Another wrote, *"their touch on my shoulder was very*

comforting" (A-8). In these two examples, the qualifiers the journal keepers used, helped

to distinguish the emotive power. In the first example, the hug received did not just feel

good, but rather, "it felt so good." In the second example, the touch on the shoulder did

not just feel comforting, it felt "very comforting." This descriptive code, along with the

frequency of phrases involving touch, used by the journal keepers helped me to

distinguish touch as an empathy code. Based on this process, the empathy codes were

created and categorized. In all, 5 primary codes emerged: 1) verbal expressions of

identification; 2) verbal expressions of difference; 3) haptics; 4) chronemics; and 5)

kinesics. In addition to these codes, 5 secondary communicative codes also surfaced in

the data that proved to contribute to the empathy felt by journal keepers. These secondary

codes are: a) proxemics, b) vocalics, c) verbal statements of spirituality, d) verbal

statements of advice, and e) verbal statements of validation. Generally, the primary codes

were discussed in 10 or more journal entries while the secondary codes generally had

around 5 to 7 mentions. Using these codes as a road map for this section, I will now begin

by exploring the five primary codes, starting with the two verbal codes.

Code 1: Verbal Expressions of Identification

The number of times journal keepers identified verbal statements paled in

comparison with the number of nonverbal communicative modalities listed in the journal

entries. However, in looking at how the students felt empathy through verbal expressions

(as recounted in their journal entries), an interesting binary emerged. The significance of

this binary warranted the creation of two separate empathy codes in order to do justice to

it. The first I have entitled "verbal expressions of identification." This type of code

occurred when an empathy partner attempted to show empathy by verbalizing that they

identified with the experiences or emotions of the distressed person. Here is an example

from one journal entry that typifies the sentiment of this type of verbalization: *"I know*

how you feel, I've been through that exact same thing"(B-14). The journal keeper who

recalled these words being spoken to them followed the sentence up with this thought, *"It*

felt really nice to know that he had empathy for me because he had been through what I

was going through"(B-14). The rhetorical strategy to identify with the journal keeper by

pointing out the similarity of their experiences facilitated a meaningful connection for the

person attempting to show empathy in this interaction. Ultimately, this expression helped

the journal keeper feel that they were not alone and that someone else knew what it was

like to be them, and feel their emotions. A journal keeper that had conflict with their

mother further illustrated this concept with these words:

> *...talking with my roommate didn't really help. He has a great relationship with*
> *his mom, so it wasn't like he could really understand. But when I was hanging out*

with my friend Ashlynn, she could tell something was wrong. I decided to open up to her about my family. She could totally relate because her mom was a lot like mine. It felt great to have her tell me she knew what I was going through, because she had been through it. I could tell she had true empathy for me. (B-29)

We don't know what this journal keeper's roommate did to try and "*help,*" but their words show that the very fact that their friend, Ashlyn, had a similar relationship with her mother allowed the journal keeper to feel understood. This seemed to create a receptiveness to the communication of Ashlyn and afforded this student the empathic fellowship of being present with the other. In essence, this seemed to be an empathy code they needed to hear in order to feel the type of empathy that was tailored to the experiences they were having in their family.

Looking closely at the journal keepers that expressed this type of code underscores the importance of affect in an empathy dance. There seemed to be a pattern between the emotions the distressed journal keepers were feeling and the perception of emotions their empathy partner had felt. Here is further clarification of how this empathy dance, that is, verbal expressions of identification, presented itself. The distressed journal keepers came into the conversation feeling strong emotions. At some point in the beginning of the empathy dance, they made the shift to vulnerable communication, as discussed in the first section of this chapter, and they opened up to their empathy partner about the distressful situation in which they were immersed. At this point, the empathy partner "nexted" with a dialogue about how they too had gone through the same experience. However, the critical part of this discursive exchange appeared to happen when the empathy partner described the emotions they felt when they were going through the "same situation." This seemed to not only validate the strong emotions that the journal keeper was feeling (a concept that will be discussed in greater depth later in this

chapter), but also it helped the journal keeper feel that their empathy partner did indeed understand what it was like to experience what they were experiencing. Journal keeper B-11 spoke about this process in the following way.

> *My husband's behavior towards me left me feeling so lonely and depressed. I also felt ashamed that my marriage had fallen apart when all of my friends and family seemed to have happy marriages or at least ones that worked.... My counselor had me join a support group for women…. I can't describe how good it felt to hear their stories and to know they knew what I was feeling. One woman in particular, approached me and talked with me about her marriage. She told me how her ex-husband had an addiction just like mine. She described perfectly how I was feeling because she had been through what I was going through…. After talking with her the first time, I no longer felt alone… Because of this conversation, her empathy meant so much to me. (B-11)*

Multiple studies investigating communication within support groups have identified sharing personal experiences, as a way to empathically relate to the experiences of another, as the most frequently used communicative strategy for showing support (Finn, 1999; Malik & Coulson, 2010; Perron, 2002). The most recent study I could find published on this topic looked at the self-help mechanisms people used in online support groups for the bereaved by suicide (Schotanus et al., 2014). The principal investigators analyzed the messages posted to code the various ways individuals attempted to show comfort to each other. They found that 77% of the online posters employed sharing personal experiences as a strategy to provide empathy for other posters. To show the strength of this number, the next highest strategy was supportive messages at 40%. These researchers concluded that the academic community needs to place greater value on the way personal narratives can communicate empathy and support in a variety of contexts. The empathy journals used in my study validate this invitation, as some journal keepers articulated their need for hearing that their empathy partner had experienced what they were going through and all of the emotions that were subsequently produced.

However, there were other journal keepers who pointed out that such an empathy code would not work for them or help them feel empathy. Thus, they needed a different empathic code to be spoken, one highlighting the difference, not the identification of the other.

Code 2: Verbal Expressions of Difference

The collective narratives of the empathy journals underscore the fact that the empathic needs of distressed individuals vary. What one person needs to hear in order to feel empathy can be very different from what another person needs vocalized. In the previous empathy code (i.e., verbal expressions of identification), the distressed journal keepers needed to hear words that reassured them that they were not alone, that another person in the world could relate to what they were feeling and experiencing, because they too had experienced and felt those same things. Alternatively, other journal keepers pointed out that the same rhetorical approach to identify with them would have been antithetical to facilitating feelings of empathy. In the words of one journal keeper:

> *I hate it when people tell you they have been through the same thing you are going through and know how you feel. No one can really know what it is like to be anyone else, all we can do is try to understand what it feels like to be them. That is why I loved talking with my counselor. He would show me empathy by saying 'I'm so sorry you went through that. I've never gone through anything like that. Help me understand what it is like and how you feel. I could tell he genuinely cared and wanted to understand me. (A-10)*

This journal keeper does not appear to desire or value verbal expressions of identification. Rather, they communicate a need for statements that speak to the uniqueness of their experience. For them, empathy seems to be best communicated when the gap between varying fields of experience are openly acknowledged and the struggle

to understand the differences takes center stage. Here is another journal keeper who vocalizes the same idea: "*He had never lost anyone close to him, and yet he comforted me. It was like, because he had never been through it, he tried harder to understand me. He was able to show me empathy by simply listening and comforting*" (B-7). The student who wrote this entry interpreted her co-worker's lack of loss as an advantageous position when it came to providing empathy. It was because of this that she felt that he tried harder. Prior to the quote above, the journal keeper composed several sentences delineating how she pushed everyone away that tried to talk to her about her loss because "they couldn't really understand" how she felt. It appears to be this mindset that carved out a space for the empathy code verbal expressions in the form of difference.

According to Schwandt (2004), the primary focus of an interactionist perspective is "to explicate the process by which meaning is developed and the nature of meanings that are represented in interactions between or among human beings" (cited in Jeon, 2004, p. 250). From this theoretical position, looking at the process by which empathy partners create a meaningful empathic dance requires a communicative process where the communicants are receptive to the individual meanings that each has placed on their lived experiences in order to co-create joint meaning between them. This process was evident in the journals, particularly when it came to affective meanings. One of the most common themes of the journal entries centered on the importance of emotion, and thus, the meanings that were produced about emotion in the empathy conversations had significance. Franks (2003) articulated the important connection between symbolic interactionism and emotion in these words:

> Symbolic interaction is almost synonymous with social construction. Emotions, within the constraints of the brain, are as constructed as stock markets, and take

on a real life of their own… Despite the importance of constructionism, there is much confusion within the camp (Maines 2000). Lutz (1988) and Flaherty (1992) see the challenge as balancing two extremes: that we are all alike emotionally and that we are all different. (Franks, 2003, p. 788)

As Franks (2003) points out, emotions are both universally constructed and personal embodiments. This understanding underscores how it is problematic to assume the way one person experiences the socially constructed notion of certain emotions, for example, shame, is indeed, experienced the same way by another. This concept proved important for journal keepers that gravitated towards the empathy code-verbalization of difference. They expressed the need for their empathy partner to allow them to symbolically represent the personal embodiment of the socially constructed emotions they were feeling. Journal keeper A-32 passionately expressed this idea in this way,

> *I no longer go to my Mom for empathy. Growing up she would always try to use empathy as a way to control me. She would tell me, I know what it is like to be a teenager, I went through the same problems you are. just so she could tell me what to do. But the truth is, she doesn't know how I feel, because times have changed and they didn't have cell-phones, facebook and the internet when she was my age. She didn't have to deal with shit that I have to. That is why I go to my Dad. He doesn't presume to know what it is like to be me…. He always lets me talk about what is frustrating me, without trying to put words in my mouth or act like he knows how I feel. (A-32)*

In looking at the way this student expressed a need for the empathy code-verbalization of difference, it is important to note that the student acknowledges that they made a conscious decision to seek empathy from someone who would allow them to explore the uniqueness of their emotions in an open and inviting way. This decision shows that they have a preference for the type of empathy partner with whom they would like to create an empathy dance. This preference gives further credence to the need for differing empathy codes, such as verbalization of difference, which the student clearly discusses.

However, there is another important insight into empathy codes that that can be identified in this entry, and that is the importance of relationship type in co-creating any empathy dance. The student who wrote this entry describes her mother as "using empathy as a way to control me." The relational dynamic between the two, that is parent-child relationship, placed the mother in a more dominant role. Athens (2010), a sociologist and symbolic interactionist has called for a new wave of symbolic interactionist researchers to become "radical interactionists," that "give far more prominence to the role that subordination plays in human group life than conventional symbolic interactionism does" (Athens, 2010, p. 340). Essentially, the student of the above journal entry provides an opportunity to acknowledge the issue of subordination that Athens (2010) is talking about, revealing that the preferences for empathy codes are not merely contingent on personality or contextual factors, but are also tempered by power structures in the relationship between the two actors. Thus, the interpretation of an empathy attempt by an empathy partner, whether it be communicated as verbal statements of difference or identification, will influence and be influenced by the perceived power dynamic involved. Having said that, this journal keeper admitted to seeking out her father for empathy, a relationship that is also laden with hierarchy. Consequently, her father's openness to her expression of emotion, allowed her to overlook the "control" inherent in his hegemonic parental role, thus causing her to seek him out for empathy.

Given the binary of these two empathy codes, verbal expressions of identification and difference, a logical question to ask is, how does an empathy partner know which type of dance to attempt to co-create with a distressed person? The journal entries did not afford a clear-cut answer to this question. However, there is insight to be gained in

referring back to the dance metaphor. As will be pointed out later, the key to creating a productive dance is learning to respond to the actions and reactions of our dance partner. Based on this, finding the "right" thing to say is less important than adjusting our communicative moves to their moves. The skill comes in learning to probe, adapt, and next in empathic ways, rather than in finding the perfect thing to say. To further support this, the majority of the journal keepers found nonverbal communication to be more empathic during their interaction, which again, underscores the notion that for many, empathy is less about what is said and more about what is embodied. Thus, the last three primary codes are all nonverbal, and it is to those that we now turn, beginning with haptics.

Code 3: Haptics

Haptics, or the use of touch, surfaced in the journal entries as an important empathy code. Journal keepers listed specific ways in which various forms of touch contributed to their empathic collaboration with their empathy partners. They also distinguished which types of touching they deemed appropriate to empathic communication and which factors influenced inappropriate empathic touching. Furthermore, many of the ways they wrote about touch support the growing body of research on haptics. However, before connecting those theoretical dots, let's look at some journal entries that highlight the way haptics surfaced in the data.

"it felt so good to just be hugged" (A-22)

"we cried, she held my hand, and I knew she felt my pain." (B-28)

"as we talked he stroked my hair, calming me down and showing me he cared." (B-17)

These students provide a few examples that highlight the importance of haptics as an empathy behavior. Whether it is a hug, holding hands, or stroking another's hair, each of the journal keepers felt empathy through physical contact with another. The theoretical approach to this study (i.e., symbolic interactionism) helps explore the meanings that get created through this communicative modality.

While much of the daily communicative actions of individuals are routine, symbolic interactionism argues that we are constantly negotiating and renegotiating the roles we play and the relational definitions we have with others. Thus, as sense makers, people are repetitively evaluating and interpreting the social situations they are faced with as they symbolically navigate their social worlds. Articulating a symbolic interactionist perspective, Hewitt (1988) has argued that, "It is in the face of problematic occurrences that our capacity to designate and interrupt is crucial to the success of our actions" (p. 16). In essence, when emotionally charged moments or difficult situations arise, the interpretive process is crucial to the success of an interaction because participants must be able to read and respond to others in appropriate and meaningful ways. The empathy partners who successfully connected with the journal keepers through touch, did so because they were able to read the difficult (emotionally charged) situation and respond in a symbolic way that proved meaningful for the journal writer. However, the meanings that were being produced in the interactions were co-created and it was the perception of the journal keepers that played the critical role in whether the touch attempt was interrupted as an appropriate form of empathy. The following two journal entries reinforce this idea further.

When asked to describe communicative behaviors that facilitated feelings of

empathy, two journal keepers choose to reference situations from the past that were bad experiences of empathy as a way to highlight aspects of the positive experiences. In each of these cases, touch played an essential role. The first of these entries comes from a student who was distressed because of a problem she was dealing with at her workplace. She was so upset that she didn't want *"anyone to touch her or talk to her" (A-22)*. She retreated to her bedroom and it wasn't until her best friend showed up at her house that she began to open up and allowed herself to receive empathic communication, or rather, begin the empathic dance.

In the second journal entry, the student described speaking with a trusted neighbor during a particularly discouraging time in her life and feeling okay with the touch she received from him. She then compared this to a previous experience that made her uncomfortable. Here is what she writes about it:

> *Because I already had a good relationship with him, I felt perfectly comfortable with his gentle touch on my shoulder. In a similar situation with an ecclesiastical leader a similar touch had a completely opposite effect, because it distracted me from feeling connection with the person and wondering instead why he was touching my knee. In the second situation I felt that my personal space had been violated which unfortunately negated any kind of closeness and empathy I had felt that I was receiving up until that point. (B-24)*

When looking at these two experiences, it appears that the main factor that contributed to either the reception or polarization of touch was the *relationship* the receiver had with the person extending the touch. In the first example, the journal keeper did not want to engage in empathic communication of any type, including touch, from anyone other than her best friend. In the second, her respect and trust in her neighbor, and the relationship that they had established over the years, allowed her to be receptive and open to his gentle touch on her shoulder. These entries highlight the importance of a

sociological concept known as *touch ethic*. This idea posits that individuals have a

personal "touch ethic" that filters their interpretation of touch and when and where it is

appropriate (Benjamin & Sohnen-Moe, 2005). This ethic is created and modified by the

culture and relationships we experience throughout our lives. The perspective of one

male journal keeper illustrates the nature of this. He wrote, *"my wife knows exactly how*

to show me empathy. When I'm having a hard time I like to be close to her, and so she

will often hold me or cuddle with me to comfort me. I'm man enough to say I like to

snuggle" (B-9). Research on gendered communication has shown that men, in our

Western culture, are socialized to engage in less affectionate forms of touch when

compared to the way women are socialized (Wood & Inman, 1993). This journal keeper

gives voice to that socially constructed dynamic, as he felt the need to acknowledge that

his manhood was secure despite his desire for his wife's empathic touch. It is interesting

to note that with the exception of this one journal keeper, all of those who identified

haptic gestures as important to their empathic experiences were women. This difference

will be further discussed in the last chapter. Suffice it to say at this point, his words

reiterate the importance of relationship when it comes to touch ethic, i.e., whom we will

accept touch from, in an empathic way.

For this reason, the journal entries above show that the appropriateness of this

code of empathy is limited to relational dynamics that have co-created a level of comfort

where touching or hugging is deemed acceptable. Thus, none of the journals that

identified touch as meaningful spoke of relationships that involved counselors, co-

workers, teachers, or spiritual leaders. In these types of relationships, researchers have

shown that touching would most likely be seen as an inappropriate display of empathy,

provided the inherent boundaries that come with the role the empathy partners enact (McNeil-Haber, 2004).

Given the collective patterns in the journal entries, the code of empathic touching seems to be the most exclusive code of the five primary empathy codes and appears to be most often limited to friends, family members, and partners. Furthermore, when used appropriately, the journal keepers demonstrated that touch can be a powerful form of empathic communication. One journal keeper noted that, *"there was nothing anyone could say to make things better" (B-23).* The journal entries revealed that some distressing situations can be very painful and can't be fully understood on a verbal plane. Research has shown that in these moments, it is haptics that can often embrace the emotions and pain a distressed person is feeling, and can be a very powerful way to show empathy and comfort.

Peterson et al. (2007) analyzed video recorded treatment sessions of children with cancer as a way to investigate the way caregivers communicatively attempted to comfort their distressed child during the painful sessions. They found that parents used supportive touching behaviors as the primary way to soothe and comfort the distressed child during the painful treatment. At the conclusion of their study they invited people working in the medical community to recognize the importance of touch and to see it "as the bases for deriving future interventions to maximize effective coping and emotional well-being of both caregivers and children" (Peterson et al., 2007, p. 95). Furthermore, Dolin and Booth-Butterfield (1993) surveyed students on their perception of the most effective comforting behaviors. The results showed that behaviors related to haptics (i.e., hugs and pats) were the primary modalities identified by the participants.

These studies, and others like them, complement the value that some journal keepers placed on touch. The observations made by the students regarding touch underscored its importance as a unique and potent channel for communicating empathy. Perhaps, journal keeper B-8 summed it up most succinctly with these words: *"I could tell my boyfriend didn't know what to say. But the truth is I didn't need him to say anything in order to feel empathy from him. I was hurting so badly, I just need him to hold me" (A-17).* Indeed, this journal keeper shows the empathic needs of some individuals are best met through haptics, rather than any other channel of communication. However, the journal keepers also showed that touch is not the only meaningful way to communicate empathy without words. Moreover, it was interesting to note that with the exception of one journal keeper, all of those who identified haptic gestures as important to their empathic experiences were women. This will be discussed further in the final chapter. In addition to haptics, chronemics was another nonverbal channel that surfaced as an important empathic code.

Code 4: Chronemics

Similar to haptics, chronemics revealed itself to be a distinct form of nonverbal communication that facilitated feelings of empathy in some journal keepers. Unlike haptics, this empathy code showed that it could be communicated by anyone regardless of the role they played in the lives of the students. There were a variety of roles that journal keepers identified as communicating empathy through the use of time, none of which were deemed *inappropriate*. Rather, for some journal keepers, the willingness of the empathy partner to take time out of their day, set aside time, or allow for disruptions

to their normal routine, communicated empathy in a way that caused the entry authors to feel empathy in a way that perhaps they could not have felt through any other modality.

The rhythm of life consists of developing routines and managing interruptions. Empathic communication can play an important role in both of these aspects. For some journal keepers, it was the structured consistency of investment that they felt from another that helped them feel empathy, and for others, it was the opportunities that came from chronemic ruptures and disruptions. After moving to a new school, one student recalled how difficult it was for her to deal with the challenges that came with leaving her old friends behind and trying to fit in and make new friends. She described how it was largely her mother's empathy that helped her get through this long and challenging period of adjustment. Two key communicative things her mother did to help her feel this empathy came through the channel of chronemics. First, her mother made sure that she set aside time every day and was available to talk to her daughter when her daughter came home from school. While this is a privilege that not all mothers have, it showed commitment on the mother's part to be there for her daughter during a difficult time. In her journal entry, the daughter described how this commitment helped her feel that her mother had empathy for her and cared about what she was going through.

In addition to being routinely available, another aspect of time showed up in the student's narrative about her mother's empathy. This journal keeper described it with this simple phrase, *"She helped me get through every day"(A-16).* The adjustment period of moving to a new school didn't require a one-time grandiose empathic conversation that would make the transition all better. Rather, in order to meet her daughter's empathic needs, the mother had to be willing to run the empathic marathon required. This

reinforces the importance of recognizing that empathy needs vary greatly based on contextual factors. As this journal entry points out, some people's empathic need can be filled with a single interaction, while other individuals require days, weeks, and months of empathic investment in order to deal with perpetuating issues. Clearly, there must be a high level of relational investment to be able to do the latter, as was the case between this student and her mother. While this example highlights the importance of timing in the way routine availability and extended commitment can contribute to the empathic experience of a distressed person, there are other aspects of chronemics that appeared in the journals as being part of empathic communication.

In theorizing about the use of time and its role in our lives, Hernadi (1992) has said, "As social role-players, natural organisms and personal selves we always exist at the intersections of those intersubjective, objective, and subjective life times through which each of us participates in a variety of world times" (p. 150-151). Hernadi is drawing our attention to the various aspects of time, including the social and intersubjective nature of it. As symbolic creatures, the subjective significance individuals place on time carves out spaces and places for meaningful connections, where intersections of social-roles collide in intersubjective ways. The journals revealed that significant intersubjective chronemic intersections can often surface when ruptures in daily routines (i.e., life times) present themselves. Thus, one of the common themes in the journal narratives about empathic experiences was the spontaneous nature of their co-creation.

From dealing with a sudden death (A-25) or break-up (B-19), to losing a job (B-36), most of the experiences students recalled as creating the need for empathy were the result of spontaneous events that caught them by surprise. These moments sent them

scrambling, looking for something or someone to help them catch their balance. As a result, many of the empathic moments described in the journals were conversations that were disruptions to the relational routines of the journal keepers. Some of the journal keepers pointed to these disruptions as being an important part of the empathic dance itself. For example, the student (A-5) who described calling her sister at midnight in order to talk to her about her break-up acknowledged how the willingness of her sister to take her call and talk to her into the early morning hours helped her feel empathy with her sister. Another journal keeper (B-1) noted that her boss could tell that she was having a hard time and thus stayed after work to talk, to show her empathy, and try to cheer her up. She acknowledged that the very act of staying after work helped her feel that her boss had empathy for her. These are just two examples, but there are others I could reference. In these situations, empathy was felt when a person took the time to talk with the distressed person, when they needed it, not necessarily when it was a routinely scheduled or convenient time to talk. Based on the observations of these students, it appears that for some people, the very act of making time for someone can contribute to their overall feelings of empathy.

This empathy code required a willingness on the part of the empathy giver to invest quality, not just quantity time with the empathy seekers. The distinction between those two that surfaced from the journal entries was communication. The students in the class revealed that, when it comes to empathic communication, quality time is time spent with another in places and spaces where serious feelings and thoughts can be shared and honored. Furthermore, the journals demonstrated that some people need the investment of time, as displayed by an empathy partner, before they will open up in vulnerable dialogue

or before they will engage in creating empathic communication. This concept was described by one journal keeper (A-3) who explained that his father tried to talk to him after he had his heart broken but he told his dad that he didn't want to talk. He went on to say that his father respected his wishes to not open up about it but that his father kept inviting him to join him in doing various activities. Over time, when the journal keeper was ready, he began to open up to his father about what had happened and how much he had been hurt. He then was ready to accept the empathy his father had offered earlier. His father showed relational wisdom in knowing what he could do to was invest time with his son, without forcing him to be vulnerable. His active patience put him in a position to have an empathic exchange when the timing was right. This strategy may not work on all relationships, as the effectiveness of any approach needs to respect the unique dynamics of each relationship, however, it is a great example of one way a person can stay close and ready while honoring the timing of another.

Based on the examples highlighted above, the empathic code of chronemics proved to be a valuable way to create meaningful connection. This leads me to the final primary empathy code that surfaced from the journal entries, which is kinesics.

Code 5: Kinesics

Of all of the nonverbal gestures described by students as being important to empathic communication, those related to kinesics were identified most frequently. The notion that the body speaks louder than words seemed to be true for the students of the class. Several different types of kinetic gestures were identified by students, but none more so than eye contact.

The eyes speak. Over and over again, journal keepers acknowledged that their empathy partners made eye contact with them during the empathic exchange. The reason this gesture carried so much empathic weight can be found in both the words of the journal keepers, along with existing research on eye contact.

For decades, scholars interested in human interaction have found eye contact to be an important mode of communication. One of the first scholars to note this argued that eye contact serves three primary communicative functions: as a way to express oneself, as a way to regulate an interaction, and as a way to monitor the reactions of others (Kendon, 1967). While all three of these played a role in the empathic interaction that students had, the expressive function stood out. Perhaps this is because researchers have identified the eyes as a potent way to communicate emotion (Ekman & Friesen, 1975). Empathy, as was pointed out in the literature review, has been conceptualized as a strongly emotive experience shared with another. In order for an empathy provider to connect to a distressed person in an empathic way, they must find a way to communicate on an emotional level that speaks to the empathy recipient. For journal keepers, the eyes of their empathy partner seemed to foster this form of connection. As one journal keeper put it, *"I could tell by the way she was looking at me that she felt my pain and was sad for me" (B-34).* Another student used these words to express the same idea when talking with two empathy partners, *"The hurt in their eyes made me realize they understood my loss"(B-27).* And this third journal entry discussing the importance of eye contact by noting, *"My husband's eyes said it all. I knew he cared deeply about my situation and wanted to help" (A-1).* The words of these students support the research that eye contact can be a powerful way to communicate emotion, as was evident in many of the empathy

exchanges.

In addition to expressing emotions, the students' descriptions point to another important factor of eye contact and that is attentiveness. As has been pointed out earlier, one of the foundational tenets of symbolic interactionism is the importance of perception in any communicative interaction (Blumer, 1969). In the case of journal keepers, many vocalized that the perception of being listened to and having the attention of their speaking partner was essential to the empathic exchange. Journal keeper A-30 expressed this idea when she pointed out that her empathizer *"made full eye contact, showing me that I had her full attention" (A-30).* As an symbolic interactionist, it is not essential to know whether this journal keeper's empathy partner was actually giving her their full attention because the meaning she placed on the eye contact she was receiving made her believe her partner was *"being a good listener" (A-30).* This interpretation encouraged her to engage in the empathy dance and in her words, *"share my feelings… when I was feeling vulnerable" (A-30).* Consequently, this journal entry typifies other students who articulated the same belief, that the eye contact they received from their empathy partner was evidence that they had the attention of the other and were being listened to empathically. Here are some more examples of how they verbalized this belief:

"I could tell he was really listening by the way he looked at me." (A-17)

"Mark is one of the best listeners I know. He looks you in the eyes and gives you his full attention…" (B-14)

"He made eye contact with me… letting me know he heard every word." (A-6)

These entries highlight the importance journal keepers placed on eye contact and the way they interpreted it as being representative of their empathy partner's attentive listening. Given the responses in the journal entries, it is easy to see why eye contact has

long been a staple of research and advocates of active listening (Bodie, 2011). However, the journal entries also challenged some of the more generalized approaches to active listening, by revealing a need to adapt one's eye contact in certain situations.

One of the journals talked about how they were sitting side by side with the person they were confiding in and they described how grateful they were that the person showed empathy for them by not looking at them cry as they spoke (A-12). For this student, the decision their conversant made to avoid eye contact was a greater display of empathy because it allowed them to maintain some perceived dignity about their emotional vulnerability. Furthermore, one of the journal keepers identified themselves as an international student and spoke about how she chose to not make eye contact during her empathic exchange because it would have felt shaming in her culture (B-1). However, she noted that she still felt empathy in the conversation, even in the absence of eye contact. These two journal keepers underscore the important role that relational and cultural factors play in any empathic exchange and they also highlight the problem of overly simplistic approaches that posit that making eye contact is essential to active or empathic listening. While the majority of the journals gave credence to the notion of direct eye contact, other journals, like the two in the previous paragraph, call for a more complex understanding and an increased sensitivity to nonverbal communication, such as eye contact. Consequently, eye contact was not the only way the body communicated empathy, the face also played an important role for journal keepers.

The face as a mirror. The collective narratives of the journal entries identified facial expressions as a potent channel for communicating empathy. The emergence of this kinetic gesture is not surprising, given that earlier theorizing about empathy was

linked directly to facial expressions. At the turn of the 20th century Lipps (1903), who is often noted as the founder of empathy research, argued that individuals tend to mimic the emotional behavior and facial expressions of others, which, he posited, resulted in shared affect. A century later, researchers extended and modified Lipps theorizing, while still drawing the connection between empathy and facial expressions (Sullins, 1991; Sylvie, Herrera, & Hess, 1999). One of these lines of research has to do with the concept of emotional contagion. It was this concept that proved insightful in looking at the journal entries.

Emotional contagion takes place "when you 'catch' the emotions of others from their expressions (as you might catch a cold)" (Planalp, 1999, p.62). This has been differentiated from empathy by researchers because it can happen without the desire of one to connect with and understand the perspective or emotional state of the other. However, based on the journal entries in this study, it appears that the perception of emotional contagion can play a role, for some, in interpreting empathic communication. For these journal keepers, it was necessary for the empathizer to use facial expressions to display that they were feeling the same emotions as the journal keepers. *"By crying with me, I could tell she felt what I was feeling, and had empathy for my situation," (A-13)* one journal keeper wrote. *"My mom looked as sad as I felt," (A-29)* penned another student. Perhaps journal keeper A-9 summed it up best when she said, *"I always seek out Carolyn when problems arise, because I know she really cares. I can see it on her face… she always feels what I am feeling… and that's what true friendship and true empathy are about."* For these students, the mirrored facial expressions of their empathy partners communicated an emotional connection that perhaps could not have come any other way.

While mirroring proved important for some journal keepers, it didn't capture the way other journal keepers described facial expressions. Perhaps this is because emotions can be multifaceted and complex, which would make it extremely hard for some empathy partners to outwardly reflect what a distressed person is feeling. However, Ekman (2012) has shown that facial expressions are also very complex. The 43 facial muscles in the face make humans capable of producing thousands of facial expressions and micro-expressions (Ekman, 2003). Thus, when journal keepers couldn't perfectly mirror or match what the distressed journal keepers were feeling, they were still able to use their facial expressions in empathically effective ways. The journal entries revealed that it was the complex nature of relationships and relational historicity that facilitated feelings of connection in the face of an empathy partner. Consider this journal entry: *"we have the type of relationship where we can just look at the other's face and know what is going on. She took one look at me and knew I was hurting. I could feel her empathy for me by the way she looked back at me" (B-3).* The nature of relationship that this student describes is of such an intimate familiarity that empathy can be exchanged entirely through the face; no words or gestures are needed to supplement. It seems highly likely that this form of empathy would be extremely difficult to cultivate if the two people involved were strangers or casual acquaintances. Rather, this journal entry is describing a special type of empathy that is exclusive to those with intimate knowledge of the other person. It is a form of empathic communication that is built on the history of communication between two people regardless of complexity of their culture. Mead captured this concept in this way:

> There is the language of speech and the language of hands, and there may be the
> language of the expression of the countenance. One can register grief or joy and

call out certain responses. There are primitive people who can carry on elaborate conversations just by expressions of the countenance. (Mead, 1934, p. 147)

Interestingly though, another journal entry accentuates a different way the relationship between two people can magnify the impact of facial expressions and eye contact. In light of the previous journal entry, it naturally makes sense to assume that the more intimate a friendship or a relationship, the more meaningful empathic gestures may be perceived. Alternatively, one student's entry demonstrated that this is not always the case. This journal keeper pointed out that the impact of empathic facial expressions and eye contact can be greatly enhanced when they are offered by someone with whom one has not cultivated a great relationship. Student B-35 described having a conversation with her husband's ex-wife, a relationship "…*fraught with tension and un-empathic communication."* However, the journal keeper reported that during this particular conversation, her husband's ex-wif*e "...put down her wall and showed empathy for me like she never had before. She almost never looks me in the eyes when we talk, but this time she kept looking me in the eyes with a compassionate expression" (B-35).* For this student, the tense relational history between the two women accentuated any gestures of empathy, particularly those communicated through the face and eyes. The scarcity of the perception of these behaviors in their relationship, invited her to feel a deeper level of empathy that might not have been available otherwise.

The commonality between these two journal entries is familiarity. The friends who could communicate empathy without words and the communicative patterns co-created by the new and ex-wife, all point to the importance of relational definition and relational history when it comes to interpreting kinetic gestures in empathic exchanges. These journal keepers give emphasis to the significant role that relationship plays in

interpreting nonverbal empathic communication. They point to a more impactful form of empathy that can only come with familiarity and patterned communicative development. Here is one last journal entry to cement this concept. This entry came from a student who identified himself as a returned missionary for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. Here is an empathic exchange he wrote about.

> *I was leaving on my mission and feeling some of the strongest emotions of my life. A mixture of homesickness, fear, sadness, and excitement (mostly sadness upon leaving my little brother). He has always been my best friend and I hated leaving him for two years. When we hugged goodbye, he didn't have to say anything, the look he gave me said it all. I could tell he truly felt my pain of leaving, and that he was there for me, cheering me on and wishing me well despite it. I could also tell that he loved me and was going to miss me as much as I was going to miss him. It was one of the most powerful moments of empathy in my entire life. (B-8)*

The type of empathic communication this student described is one that took years to cultivate. The depth of the relationship between the siblings is commensurate with the depth of empathy the departing brother received from the *look* on the face of his younger brother. This entry gives prominence to both the power of facial expressions and eye contact in empathic communication, but also to the necessity of viewing those gestures through the lens of relationship. However, while the face and eyes were identified as the most prevalent form of kinesics in the empathy journals, they were not the only ones. Some journal keepers recorded how the gestures of the body of the empathizer also contributed to their feelings of empathy.

 The body language of empathy. The data spoke of the embodied nature of empathy. It is very much a visceral collaboration where meanings attributed to gestures are constantly in flux and carry deep import because of the level of immanent vulnerability at play. Whether the gestures identified in the journal entries were deliberate acts or unconsciously derived, journal keepers reported feeling empathy when their

empathy partners positioned their bodies in certain ways or used their body to convey

comforting messages. The following is a list of the kinesics of the body that surfaced in

the journals, duplicates were not included, as some of the gestures were identified by

multiple journal keepers. Also excluded were the examples of eye contact and facial

expressions used above.

"sat on the ground" (B-2)

"sitting across from me" (A-27)

"sat next to me" (A-12)

"sat still" (B-19)

"faced me" (A-30)

"leaned forward" (A-10)

"her smile" (B-22)

"walk" (A-3)

"nodding" (B-19)

"laugh" (B-4)

After analyzing this list of behaviors and contextualizing the larger paragraphs

and sentences surrounding them, two themes emerged about the way nonverbal gestures

functioned to produce feelings of empathy in journal keepers. These two themes are

mirroring and attentiveness (particularly attached to listening).

Consistent with the descriptions about facial expressions, when an empathizer

mirrored the body language or positioning of the empathy seekers, it helped certain

students feel that they were receiving empathy. For example, one journal keeper reported

that she went and sat on the ground in a moment of distress. She noted that the empathy

giver followed her and then sat down with her. Of this mirroring gesture she said, *"I was so glad that he was there with me that night and would have sat there on the ground feeling sad, weak, and vulnerable" (B-2).* This empathy partner's act of sitting on the ground with her seemed to symbolize his ability to get down into the fragile emotions she was experiencing. Journal keeper A-27 wrote about their friend *"sitting across from me, facing me, and leaning forward to periodically provide me with hugs as we cried together."* Once again, this student's empathy partner was mirroring the body position (and tears) of the distressed student. She was assuming an extremely open body position, i.e., sitting directly in front of the other person, close enough to lean in for occasional hugs. This position allowed her to not only face the journal keeper but to literally and figuratively lean into the emotional discomfort being communicated and absorb it with empathic openness.

In each of these cases, the empathy givers acted as a mirror of understanding placed directly next to or in front of the distressed student that mimicked the outward behaviors and body position of the journal keepers. This mirroring allowed the journal keepers to feel that the empathizers were able to imbibe and reflect back the strong emotions they were experiencing, thus leading them to feel empathy. While this proved an important aspect of nonverbal gestures, it was not as prominent in the data as those comments connecting attentive listening to the nonverbal communication of empathy.

One of the main descriptions associated with the positioning of the body in the journals came in the form attentive positioning. Many of the journal keepers who commented on body language did so to illustrate that their empathy partner was focusing on them during the course of their interaction. Here is an example from one journal entry,

"she also used good body language… and faced me showing that I had her full attention. This made me feel that she had time to listen to me and wanted to be there" (A-14). The simple act of turning one's body toward a distressed communicant carried empathic weight for this journal keeper. Here is how B-19 made the connection between kinesics and attentive listening. *"I could tell Dave was listening because he sat still and leaned forward while we talked" (B-19).* This student's comment also taps into research on how the body influences a discursive interaction.

Harrigan (1985) found that individuals are more likely to take back a speaking turn in a conversation when they adjust their body positions or move their hands and feet. These gestures often signal the other that they are ready to speak, thus causing them to relinquish their speaking turn. By contrast, when a person sits still, they invite their speaking partner to elaborate the idea they are expressing or keeping talking. Sitting still then is a listening-centric behavior rather than a speaking-centric one. While the research design for this dissertation did not allow for observations on how the empathy partners moved or did not move their body during the course of the empathy collaboration, what the data did reveal was the interpretation that some journal keepers had on the way their empathy partners used their bodies to generate feelings of attentive listening, as in the case of B-19 above.

Furthermore, the journal keeper's comments connecting kinesic gestures to listening are supported by research on empathic listening. Kory Floyd, one of the current scholars in this area, articulates this connection through his work on nonverbal immediacy. He describes the process in this way:

> Nonverbal immediacy comprises those behaviors that connote psychological
> closeness with others, such as smiling, maintaining eye contact, standing or sitting

in close proximity, using an open body posture, and speaking in warm vocal tones. (Floyd, 2014, p. 6)

Following this delineation of nonverbal immediacy behaviors, Floyd goes on to say, "Research with both adults (Jones & Guerrero, 2001) and children (Roberts & Strayer, 1996) confirms that effective empathic listening incorporates nonverbal immediacy behaviors" (Floyd, 2014, p. 6). Given this research, it is not surprising that journal keepers found empathic value in the nonverbal immediacy behaviors they experienced from the empathy partners, behaviors such as: *"sat next to me" (A-12), "her smile" (B-22), "nodding" (B-19),* and *"leaning forward" (A-27).*

Overall, kinesic gestures in the form of eye contact, facial expressions, and body positioning seemed to play a significant role for most of the journal keepers in helping them feel empathy. Collectively, this constellation of behaviors emerged more frequently in the journal entries than any other form of symbolic interaction, including verbal statements. This is consistent with research on comforting messages (Burleson & Goldsmith, 1998; Goldsmith & MacGeorge, 2000; Jones & Wirtz, 2006; Samter, Morse, & Whaley, 2013). The majority of this research has been done using self-report questionnaires. However, Jones and Guerrero (2001) conducted a study of face-to-face interactions investigating the nonverbal immediacy cues and verbal person centeredness of individuals attempting to comfort a distressed person. After the primacy of nonverbal immediacy cues surfaced in their analysis, these researchers concluded that, "indeed, nonverbal immediacy might be the primary vehicle through which empathy, liking, and warmth are communicated, whereas, verbal person centeredness might largely function to induce re-appraisal" (Jones & Guerrero, 2001, p. 591). The data for this dissertation supported their projection. The nonverbal behaviors identified far outnumbered the verbal

messages student wrote about. This is why the majority of the primary empathy codes are nonverbal modalities, and the majority of the secondary codes (which were created from fewer data) are built around verbal messages. But, even in these secondary codes, two additional nonverbal behaviors proved important for students, i.e., proxemics and vocalics. Consequently, now that the primary codes have been explored, I will now turn my attention to the secondary codes.

Code 6: Proxemics

As mentioned at the outset, analyzing nonverbal gestures in isolation can be problematic, as they so often work in symphony to create the ambience of the overall communicative dance and the meanings that get produced. This is particularly true of kinesics, haptics, and proxemics. In face-to-face encounters, they can be so intertwined that to speak of one implicates either one or both of the others. For example, in order to touch or hug someone (haptics), one must close the distance between the two people (proxemics), and lean into their body (kinesics). The data analysis demonstrated that students showed conformity in describing events such as a hug. This relegated proxemics to a secondary code, as students were far less likely to talk about closing the distance when writing about a hug; the embrace itself, intuitively, proved the most meaningful part of the exchange for journal keepers. Thus, in analyzing and coding statements related to proxemics, there was a small portion of the data that explicitly identified proxemics as a contributing communicative gesture but there were far more instances where it was implied or operating in conjunction with other gesture descriptions. Despite this disparity, a few insights regarding the use of proxemics did surface, beginning with the importance

of relational and contextual facts.

Like all communicative behaviors, the use of space was influenced by the context and the relationship of the people involved. The appropriate amount of space between the distressed journal keepers and their empathy partners varied based on where they were and how well they knew each other. In accordance with previous research, the more familiar the *relationship*, the more likely journal keepers were to allow their empathy partners to enter their personal space (Moore, 2010; Olson & Olson, 2000). Moreover, when the physical distance between the students and their empathy partners was appropriate to the cultural norms associated with the *setting* they were in, the students demonstrated that they were more inclined to engage in co-creating an empathy dance. For example, the boss who came from behind his desk to sit next to the journal keeper limited the power gap between the two and made a decision to create a space between them that allowed her to feel an appropriate closeness given his role and the work setting they shared *(B-1)*. Had he stayed behind his desk or sat so close to the journal keeper that they were touching, his empathic attempts would have communicated power differences that research shows could have greatly changed the empathic dance (Burgoon, 1978). Therefore, in co-creating moments for an empathic exchange to happen, the journal entries demonstrated that both the distressed person and their empathy partner needed to find a distance to communicate that was both appropriate to the relationship and to the setting of their empathic conversation.

Whether consciously or subconsciously, some of the communicative actions described by journal keepers created spaces for empathic exchanges to occur and some of these had to do with proxemics. Baxter and Montgomery (1996) have posited that people

vacillate between different dialectics to meet personal and relational needs. One of these dialectics is the desire for closeness at times and space at other times. Many of the journal keepers illustrated this dialectic when discussing the precipitating events and facilitated the empathic exchanges they journaled about. In many cases, the students vocalized wanting space after experiencing the initial distress that created the need for empathy. Comments such as, *"I just wanted to be alone" (B-4), "I didn't want to talk to anyone" (B-1),* and *"I usually deal with my problems by myself rather than open up to people" (A-19)* illustrate this point. This initial response surfaced in several of the journals.

In each of these cases, the pendulum from initially wanting space eventually swung back to a desire for closeness and empathy. When this desire finally arose, some of the journal keepers described how their empathy partners placed themselves in physically close positions where they would be ready to talk when the journal keeper was ready. For example, as was noted earlier in the chronemics section, one journal keeper *(A-3)* explained that their parents could tell that they were having a hard time and wanted to speak with them about it but respected their desire for space. Rather than forcing themselves on their child, this parent did their best to remain physically close to their child by inviting the distressed child to join them for activities, such as going to see a movie. This both communicated caring for the child and allowed them to be ready when the child had a desire to finally open up. Ultimately, by staying within close proxemics of their child, the parents created an optimal situation to create an empathy dance with their distressed child, which is exactly what the happened in the student's journal entry.

The very act of traveling to a distressed person seems to have two strong communicative implications for the co-creation of empathy: It can either increase the

likelihood that the distressed person will engage in empathic communication or *the act itself* can be interpreted as a form of empathic communication. For one student *(B-22)*, this happened when he was hospitalized after a severe accident. He was confined to his hospital bed for some time as the doctors worked on him. He recalled how challenging and discouraging the entire ordeal was and how it dragged on and on. In this state, he said that it was the empathic behaviors that he received from his girlfriend that helped pull him through and one of the very first empathic gestures he described had to do with proxemics. He used this short phrase to capture the gesture, *"while in the hospital she would sleep by my bed side."* This was a decision that she made that closed the distance between them and helped him feel that she had empathy for what he was experiencing.

The journal entries also highlighted that there are times when being physically close is just not possible. In choosing a meaningful empathic exchange to write about, only 2 of the 74 journals identified experiences that did not happen face-to-face. These two journals described having their empathic exchanges over the phone, which obviously limited their ability to view the majority of nonverbal communication available. Despite this, both described elements of vocalics as contributing to the feelings of empathy they experienced from their empathy partner on the other end of the line. Thus, it is to vocalics that our attention now shifts.

Code 7: Vocalics

For communication scholars, vocalics is the study of the way a person uses their voice as a means of expression, as opposed to the actual words being used (i.e., verbal communication). It is sometimes referred to as *paralanguage* because it breathes meaning

into the utterances of an individual. As a form of nonverbal communication, vocalics helps communicants interpret the emotional quality of a message, and the possible intent of the sender (e.g., are they being sarcastic, sincere, flippant, etc.). In analyzing the journal entries, some of the students recited elements of vocalics as contributing to the feelings of empathy they experienced in communicating with another. This section will spotlight these elements.

Of all of the journals, the two entries that spoke of vocalics the most were the only two journals that reported having their empathic conversation over the phone. This intuitively makes sense because it was the only nonverbal channel they had access to during the exchange. The first entry involved a student calling her sister at midnight to talk about the emotional break-up she had with her boyfriend *(A-5).* In the first part of her entry she points out that when she initially called, her sister "*answered brusquely and sounded annoyed that I was calling.*" This response prompted the journal keeper to start crying, which then caused her sister to *"change… her whole demeanor"* and keep a "*positive tone throughout the conversation.*" The journal admits that after her sister changed her tone, she felt like it was okay for her to unload her feelings.

The second example of how empathy can be communicated over the phone using vocalics provided more detail on the topic than any other journal. Perhaps this was because this student chose to highlight several conversations that took place over the phone. Rather than try to paraphrase or cut and paste the various vocalic sentiments from this journal entry, I think it would be better to provide a large section of the entry:

> *During my divorce, I experienced a range of emotions, most of which were negative and destructive. It was painful to try to make it through the day without letting them overwhelm me… The best form of comfort I received was in talking to my best friend. I would usually call her late at night after particularly challenging*

days. At the time she lived in a different city, so we would call each other all of the time. She could tell when I was hurting really bad and so she would show me genuine empathy. I could tell it was genuine because of the way she was talking to me. When I cried she would pause and let me cry. Then she would ask me questions in a quiet and respectful tone. Another way I could tell she had empathy for me was the way she would feel what I was feeling. When I got angry, she would get angry with me and we would both shout and swear. Sometimes this would make me us laugh and feel better. She seemed to know when to be quiet and serious in her tone and when to crack a joke to make me laugh. Well I don't remember any particular words she used to comfort me. I know that I could always count on her to show me empathy. (B-4)

From these two examples, several aspects of vocalics surface. First, it is interesting to note that, just as there is an empathy dance that gets created through other modalities of communication, there is an emotional dance that was generated between speakers through the use of vocalics, and this dance either flowed toward empathy or did not. In the first example, the *"brusquely"* and *"annoyed"* vocalics of the journal keeper's sister brought a tearful response from the journal keeper. These tears were not the result of a ventilating release, according to the journal keeper's description, but rather a response of not feeling warmth in her sister's voice. Once her sister could tell she was in pain (by her tears), she changed her vocalics to a *"positive tone,"* and only then could they start to co-produce the empathy dance that followed. Furthermore, because the journal keeper was reaching out to her sister, a particular other in her life, Mead argues that the impact of her communication is magnified, thus increasing the journal keepers sensitivity towards her vocalics (Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934). Shifting the focus to the second journal entry provides additional insight into this type of empathic dance and how it gets co-created through vocalics.

In the second narrative, the journal keeper highlights the importance of matching one's vocalics to the emotional tone of a distressed individual. When her friend was able

to do this, she interpreted this change in vocalics as a display of empathy. The ability of her friend to change and adapt her vocalics, seems to have played a major role in the overall empathy dance. When her friend spoke quietly, the journal keeper interpreted this as a sign that her friend had empathy for pain. Conversely, when she shouted, and her friend did the same, she also interpreted this as a vocal display of empathy. The fact that her friend could get angry *with* her helped her feel that her friend had enough empathy for her that she could understand and identify with the strong emotions she was experiencing. Furthermore, this entry illustrates the way pausing can facilitate empathic interpretations.

Rowe (1969, 1974) was one of the first researchers to examine the effects of pausing on discursive turn-taking. She conducted this research in the teaching context, and found that a teacher's wait time increased a student's response. To be exact, when a teacher waited 1 second, the average student response was 7 words. However, when an instructor paused for 3 seconds, the students quadrupled the length of their responses to 28 words. The simple act of pausing allowed the students to express their ideas more fully, making it possible for them to feel that their thoughts were heard and had value in the classroom space. Since these initial studies, other scholars have validated Rowe's findings and argued that pausing is an important aspect of interpersonal communication, as it allows people to feel understood (Margutti, 2006; Tobin, 1987).

This line of research provides insight into why the journal keeper above would attribute the pausing of her empathy partner as an important part of their empathic dance. In pausing so her distressed friend could express and experience the strong emotions she was feeling, the empathy partner was able to communicate caring and a willingness to listen and understand what was being communicated. This journal entry shows that for

some people, not saying anything can actually be interpreted as a very empathic response. However, we will shift now to when journal keepers did say something.

Code 8: Verbal Statements of Spirituality

As has been previously stated, one of the biggest phenomena found in the empathy journals was the emphasis that was placed on nonverbal communication. Despite this finding, there were journal keepers that provided accounts of what was said during their empathic conversations. These journal segments afforded some insight into how empathy can be communicated verbally. In some of these entries the verbal references were coupled with nonverbal observations. However, because these nonverbal elements have been explicated above, this section will only focus on the words that were said between the students and their empathy partners. While these verbal codes are secondary codes because they are supported by less data, the fact that these verbal statements surfaced in their journal accounts demonstrates how they made an impact on the empathy felt by journal keepers. The first of these four secondary codes that will be explored centers on the way spirituality surfaced in the journals.

One of the ways a group of students reported feeling empathy was through statements about spirituality that were uttered by their empathy partners. Whether the journal keepers and their empathy partners shared religious beliefs is unknown or at least no such evidence surfaced in the journal entries. Consequently, the few journals that referenced this type of dialogue unanimously posited that it helped them feel that the other person understood their pain and had empathy for them. One of the journal keepers described it in this way, *"he started saying a prayer and prayed that I would find comfort*

and that everything was going to be ok and would work out" (B-2). She goes on to say how this prayer helped her feel that he understood the way she was hurting, thus contributing to her overall feelings of empathy. Another journal keeper reported feeling empathy when the person they were speaking with spoke about deity and a larger plan. In recalling the empathic conversation he had, he commented that this empathy partner said the following: *"I know it feels like God is ignoring your prayers, but I promise you he's not. God has a plan for all of us, and maybe he wants you to wait a bit to start your mission for a reason only he knows" (A-18).* Directly following this statement, the journal keeper admitted, *"This man's empathy, advice, and thoughtful demeanor, were more valuable to me than he could even have completely known."*

There is small movement in the medical community to rethink the role physicians and nurses play in treating patients, particularly those with serious illnesses. This line of thinking argues that a patient's spiritual well-being should also be considered in treatment, along with their physical care. Chism and Magnan (2009) express this philosophy in noting, "spiritual empathy – verbally expressing one's understanding of a patients spiritual concerns – is itself a form of spiritual care and an essential feature of nurse-patient interactions that facilitate the patient's movement toward experiences of spiritual well-being" (p. 579). It is easy to see how this type of empathy can be important to well-being, when one understands the way "spirituality" has been defined within the medical community. "Spirituality, is defined by categories such as faith, a personal relationship with a transcendent being, a purpose in life, and the ability to find meaning" (Sulmasy, 1997, p.5). Herbert, Sherrington, Maher, and Moseley (2001) posit "to ignore the spiritual aspects of illness, then, is to ignore a significant dimension of the

experience" (p. 685).

Because my research was conducted at a university where a large portion of the student body belong to one particular religion, it isn't difficult to connect this line of research in the medical community to what the journal keepers articulated when addressing spirituality. For example, the statements made by B-2 and A-18 above reveal that the spiritual connection that their empathy partners provided helped them reframe their distressing experiences and find comfort, faith, and meaning. Journal keeper B-11 provided further support for this in these words: *"She also told me that God had given me this burden to help me grow closer to him, and to know how to help other women that suffered in this way. Her empathy helped me realize that perhaps my life had a greater purpose than I realized."* In order for this type of symbolic interaction to have the empathic influence that these journal keepers describe, it is important to consider that there must be shared meaning involved about the nature of spirituality. Without this, it would be very difficult to co-create empathy in this way because of the differing belief systems colliding. Thus, it is important to note that each of the journal keepers that spoke of spirituality, not only accepted the paradigm with which these comments were made, but also placed value in that paradigm. Consequently, these types of statements were not the only ones that journal keepers reported placing value on; for some, statements of advice also carried considerable merit. It is to this code the focus now turns.

Code 9: Verbal Statements of Advice

Another surprising use of empathic language that emerged in the journals was the way advice can be experienced as empathic communication. While several journal

keepers reported they felt empathy from their communicative partners because they did not offer advice, e.g., *"he didn't need to sit there and give me advice" (B-13)*, there were four journal keepers who provided an alternate perspective. Even though these journal keepers were in the minority, they shed a light on the versatility of empathic communication and the importance of relational history in empathic exchanges. The references on empathic advice were as follows.

The first journal keeper who connected advice to empathic communication recalled an experience when he was confused and angry about the behavior of a girl he was starting to date *(A-11)*. He felt like she misunderstood their relationship. He saw them as casually dating and available to date and see other people, while she interpreted their relationship as more serious. In an effort to find empathic understanding, he reached out to a female friend. He reported that *"she let me know that things like kissing and other intimate moments mean a whole lot more to girls than they do boys."* She invited him to consider that the next time he was with a girl because he was a "good guy." After receiving this advice he concluded, *"she did feel bad for me… and I got some very good insight about girls that I didn't know before."* Ultimately, his female friend's advice on how to view this dating partner's behavior validated his perspective on the matter, resulting in his feeling like his female friend had empathy for him.

The second and third journal keepers who reported appreciating advice in empathic communication were highlighted in the previous category on spiritual language (A-18 and B-11). These were the journal keepers who wrote that their empathy partners advised them to consider that *"God had a plan"* for them and that they needed to consider that while facing their current distressing situations. Recall that journal keeper

A-18 framed this type of empathic communication by saying that this man's *"advice"* was *"more valuable to me than he could have ever completely known."*

The fourth journal keeper *(B-16)* that wrote about advice in a favorable way recalling a conversation she had with a friend about whether to be in a serious relationship with the guy she was dating. This journal keeper was experiencing a range of strong emotions about taking this step, because in her previous relationship she had been with an abusive boyfriend. Consistent with the three previous examples, the empathy she described feeling in her conversation with her friend came as a result of the advice she was offered. Specifically, her friend reinforced the idea that even though she had been abused in the past, she had landed a good guy this time and she needed to give him a fair shot to get to see how great she really was.

In each of these examples, the empathy giver was able to use advice in a way that helped the journal keepers feel that they had empathy for them. Taking a closer look at how they did this is revealing. In each example, the advice was couched in language that validated and acknowledged the other person's pain, history, and emotional state. In addition, the advice that was offered spoke directly to the core identity issues that seemed to be at the center of the journal keeper's amplified emotions. In the first example, the male student said he didn't want to be perceived as a *"common douche bag guy"* that was *"rude"* and *"misleading" (A-11)*. The advice he was offered about *"girls"* helped him feel that he wasn't any of these things. In the second and third examples, the journal keepers said he was *"depressed," "vulnerable," "angry,"* and *"confused."* The first, *(A-18),* noted that he wasn't able to put on the identity of being a missionary and the second *(B-11)*, that she wasn't able to make her marriage work. The spiritual advice they

received helped each of them reconstruct a new identity, one of a patient and faithful follower of "God's plan." In the fourth example, *(B-16),* as a result of the abuse she had received in her previous relationship, the journal keeper was scared to let her new boyfriend get close to her because she felt like she "*was a flawed person."* The advice her friend gave her assuaged this fear by building her self-esteem and helping her realize she was worthy of love. It appears that a key factor that contributed to the empathy that was felt by the journal keepers came as result of advice that spoke directly to the shame that came from unwanted identities. Brene Brown's research on shame brings insight into this concept as she posits that "unwanted identities are characteristics that undermine our vision of our 'ideal' selves" (Brown, 2007, p. 74).

When we believe we might embody the characteristics that are antithetical to the identities we desire, we feel shame. In order to break free of these unwanted identities and push the shame back, Brown (2007) explains we need to stop pathologizing (i.e., believing that something is wrong with me), and we need to start contextualizing (i.e, see the big picture), normalizing (i.e., recognizing we aren't the only one), and demystifying (i.e., speaking with others). Interestingly, the advice that journal keepers described as empathic and helpful fulfilled each of these functions. The empathy givers were able to help the journal keepers push back that shame of their unwanted identities by providing some advice that demystified the temptation to pathologize their behaviors. This process helped journal keepers contextualize and normalize their current situations and accept both the advice and the empathic communication of their empathy partners. Consequently, these identity issues also seem to be an important part of the next empathy code, verbal statements of validation.

Code 10: Verbal Statements of Validation

Another category of verbal statements that emerged from the journal entries focused on validation. Several journal keepers reported that they were able to experience empathy when they felt validated by their speaking partner. Unpacking the descriptions of validation in the journals revealed that there were two forms of this type of code that resonated with the students. The first form could be characterized as *perspectival validation* and the second form as *emotive validation*. While each of these forms of validation was most commonly mentioned independent of the other, they are by no means mutually exclusive. The following delineates the differences between the two.

The word validation comes from the Latin word "validus," meaning "supported by facts or authority" (Online Etymology Dictionary, 2010). Perspectival validation occurred in the journals when an empathy partner was able to respond to the narratives of the distressed person in a way that showed support for the personal facts they were describing. One of the fundamental tenets of symbolic interactionism is that the semblance of reality is constructed within the experiences and communicative networks of individuals (Blumer, 1969). In other words, each of us operates from our own reality, a reality made up of our personal truths that consist of personal facts built around what we have experienced. These personal facts construct our perspective and when we are speaking them, we are speaking our truth (Deleuze, 1998). After reading the journals it became evident that one of the core desires for seeking empathy is a need that emotionally distressed individuals have to have their perspectives (i.e., personal facts) validated. Perspectival validation took place when journal keepers concluded that their perspective of their personal reality was supported by the individual they were speaking

with. While nonverbals may contribute, the primary channel for communicating this form of validation, as reported in the journals, was through language. During their empathic exchange, the empathy givers were able to verbally respond to the personal truth narratives of the journal keepers in a way that made the journal keepers feel that their perspectives were valid.

Ironically, none of the references to verbal statements of perspectival validation that emerged in the journals provided the exact language or phrases that were used by the empathy partners. The journal keepers only acknowledged that their empathy partners *"validated"* their perspective with *"their words"* or by the *"things they said,"* in response to their personal narratives *(A-10, B-23, and B-27).* The crux of this idea can be summed up by one short statement found in a journal entry, *"Her reassuring and validating statements… made me feel that my thoughts were valid" (A-30).* Whatever the empathy partner said, it was interpreted by the journal keeper as a supportive sanctioning of their thoughts (i.e., personal facts). While there was no descriptive cord that bound all of the references to perspectival validation together, for example a vocalized need of some sort, the same communicative vagueness also manifest itself in the second form of validation, emotive validation.

While perspectival validation contributed to the feelings of empathy by some journal keepers, statements related to emotive validation surfaced more often and seemed to collectively carry more empathic weight. This makes sense when considering that the experience of empathy, as described by journal keepers, is an embodied, visceral phenomenon. It involves both emotive and cognitive elements. Thus, whereas perspectival validation facilitates primarily cognitive empathic communication, emotive

validation speaks to the intense embodied feelings that often create the need for empathy. Based on its depiction in the journal entries, this form of validation also occurred verbally, when empathy partners were able to use language in a way that made the journal keepers feel that their emotions were understood and appropriate reactions to whatever situation gave rise to them.

To develop a greater understanding of this type of empathy code, it is essential to recognize that one of the most common themes that found its way into the collective discourse of the empathy journals was the emphasis on emotion. There was a large range of emotions that journal keepers described feeling prior to and during their empathy conversations, emotions such as guilt, shame, anger, fear, sadness, discouragement, jealousy, betrayal, hatred, loneliness, anxious, and hopelessness *(A-4, B-13, A-3, B-2, A-30, B-32, B-35, and B-22).* Journal keepers often made statements that demonstrated their struggle to understand, cope with, and accept these strong emotions. Research on emotional intelligence and emotional heritage provides insight into why individuals in our Western culture have such difficulty explicating and communicating about the emotional aspects of their life. Most individuals gain their emotional philosophies from their families, particularly their caregivers, and Gottman's research has shown that it is far more common for people to be raised in households where dark emotions are either dismissed or discouraged, rather than accepted and validated (Gottman, 2001). Thus, we live in a culture where the majority of people have never learned to accept and manage the darker emotions they experience. Looking at the journal entries supports the research on this topic, as the vast majority of journal keepers used language that showed their aversion to experiencing the strong, dark emotions they felt. Statements such as, *"I knew*

I shouldn't feel jealous about…" (A-6) or *"I felt like a bad person for being so angry at…" (A-8)* were common in the journals. Given this, it intuitively makes sense that students would value empathy partners who validated the range of emotions that journal keepers were experiencing.

By validating the deep and complex emotional states of journal keepers, empathy partners afforded the opportunity for the distressed students to accept the emotions they were experiencing and acknowledge that they were appropriate reactions based on the situations that produced them. This form of validation was described in the journals as a verbal process. One journal keeper pointed to this communicative process in these words, *"he let me know that it was okay to be mad. That he would be mad too if he was in my shoes. This made me feel that I wasn't wrong for feeling what I felt" (A-10).* Another journal keeper used these words to highlight this form of empathic validation, *"My friend told me I wasn't over-reacting, and that they felt the same way when they lost their friend, that the pain and sadness doesn't just go away… she helped me realize it was alright to be sad about the death even though it had happened a while ago." (A-25)* In these examples, emotive validation by empathy partners invited the journal keepers to engage in the empathy dance by accepting their own emotions. It is as if the journal keepers were looking for permission to feel the way they did, and the empathy partners gave them that permission with their validation. Given what Gottman (2001) and other researchers have found about the difficulty individuals often have with accepting their own emotions, it is understandable to see why this empathy code would carry empathic weight. Building on the concept of validation, another type of verbal statements that connected to empathy in the journal entries had to do with shared experiences.

One perspective that surfaced among some journal keepers' narratives was that a person can feel empathy with another person, even if the empathy partner has not been through a similar distressing experience. However, in looking at the language of empathy, that is, what empathy partners actually *said* that facilitated feelings of empathy in students, some journal keepers pointed to statements of shared experiences as being important to their empathic dance. For these journal keepers, verbal expressions that highlighted the fact that their conversants had been through a similar situation helped them feel as if they could understand their emotions and perspective and thus have greater empathy with them.

The journal entries that identified shared experience as being important to their reception of empathy were also the group of journals that expressed that they preferred the empathy partner to use verbiage that spoke to this identification, as mentioned earlier. This group of journals were, for the most part, the same journals that reported feeling empathy when their empathy partner said phrases such as, *"I know exactly how you feel, I've been through that too" (A-12).* It intuitively makes sense that this verbal strategy would be the better way to connect with people that feel that they have shared similar experiences, as opposed to the opposite strategy, *"I have no idea how you must be feeling right now, help me understand" (B-32).* Consequently, I wondered if the nature of the relationship between the empathy partner and the distressed student had more to do with the acceptance or rejection of shared experience empathic communication. However, taking a closer look at the types of relationships described in the shared experience journal entries, no pattern emerged to support the idea that certain types of relationships facilitated the acceptance of the shared experience narratives. The relationships described

ranged from total strangers, to close friends and family members. This finding surprised me and caused me to go back and look at the types of relationships and situations described in each of the journals that identified verbal statements as facilitating empathy.

After surmising that the type of relationship that the two interactants had co-created prior to engaging in the empathy dance might play a key role in pointing to why the journal keepers chose to interpret the words of empathy partners in a favorable light, it was interesting to note that no explanatory patterned emerged. The nature of the relationships between the empathy partners and journal keepers was varied and ranged from impersonal to deeply personal. This caused me to look for patterns of situational factors that might have contributed to the positive interpretation of empathic verbal statements. Once again, no strong patterns emerged. The nature of the situations was diverse and distinct, as were the timing, location, and context of the empathic conversations. Based on this, it appears that the effectiveness of verbal statements in facilitating empathy, as captured in this small sample of empathy journals, is not formulaic. When journal keepers recalled the words of empathizers as being important to their joint experience of empathy, it seems to be the result of a *unique* confluence of contextual and personal forces. Thus, the journal keepers showed that the words of a stranger sitting on a park bench can be just as empathically powerful as the words of a romantic partner sitting around the kitchen table. Moreover, while the words that empathy partners uttered to journal keepers were important to creating the empathy dance, it is important to remember that the influence of relationship, timing, setting, etc., helped give power and frame those words, in the overall empathic experience of journal keepers.

Conclusions

In this chapter, I discussed how the journal keepers were asked to share an experience where they felt empathy and then to identify the specific communication behaviors that their empathy partners enacted that resulted in their feelings of empathy. After a careful analysis of the journal entries, I explained that two communicative themes emerged from the data: The first was importance of the dynamic flow of the empathy experiences that students shared, namely the way communication operated to create and facilitate the empathy experience, and the second was the importance of specific communicative behaviors that produced feelings of empathy in the journal keepers. To bring these themes to life, I used a dance metaphor that compared the ebb and flow of an empathy interaction to that of different types of music and dances, and I used the concept of dance steps to discuss the specific communicative maneuvers that the empathy partners enacted in order to create and sustain the empathy dance. One of the reasons I used this metaphor was to show that the dance of empathy that surfaced in the journals revealed that there were communicative patterns of coordinated movements that created the empathy interaction. Particularly important to these patterns were the concepts of turning points that were created by the journal keepers' shift to vulnerable communication at the outset of the empathy interaction, followed by their empathy partners' ability to use their "next" speaking turn to respond with empathy.

Once the empathy dance was underway, I explained how the journal entries identified the specific communicative behaviors that sustained the empathy dance throughout. The analysis of these behaviors revealed that two types of empathy codes emerged from the data. The primary codes were those that surfaced the most in the

students' narratives and seemed to make the biggest impact on the students' feelings of empathy. In all, there were five of these codes: verbal expressions of identification, verbal expressions of difference, haptics, chronemics, and kinesics. The secondary codes were communicative behaviors that were not quite as prevalent, but still emerged from the data as contributing to the students' feelings of empathy. There were also five of these codes, which were proxemics, vocalics, verbal statements of spirituality, verbal statements of advice, and verbal statements of validation. It was pointed out that although there were an equal amount of verbal and nonverbal codes, it was the nonverbal behaviors that were more prevalent and they seemed to have the biggest impact on the collective empathy interactions of the students. Ultimately, the analysis of these codes highlighted that empathy is not formulaic, that it can be problematic to assume that certain empathy behaviors will work in all potential empathy interactions. Rather, the journal narratives underscored that what is perceived as empathy is largely the result of the context of an empathy interaction and the relationship between the empathy partners. In the next chapter this concept will receive further attention as the analysis moves to exploring the way the students understanding of empathic communication changed over the course of the semester.

CHAPTER 5

EXPLORATIONS OF EMPATHIC LEARNING

FROM A COMMUNICATIVE STANDPOINT

In the preceding chapter, I provided an analysis of the experiential learning journal entries students wrote based on empathy conversations they participated in. Specific verbal and nonverbal empathic behaviors were identified, along with the sequential communicative dynamics of their empathy interactions. The insights generated by the students' entries provided greater awareness of the essential role that communication plays in construction of empathy. In this chapter, I will explore the larger understanding that the students gained over the course of the entire semester in the Communication 3110 class that was the site of this research project. The scope of this exploration will be limited to the conceptual changes that the students went through as they relate to their understanding of the communication underpinnings that facilitate empathy. The data and analytical approach of this chapter were conducted in the following ways.

At the outset of the semester (i.e., on the very 1st day of class), the students were asked to write down their answer to two questions. The first question was, "How would you define empathy?" The second question asked, "Why is empathy important?" Their

answers were collected and stored away. Subsequently, on the final day of the semester (not counting the day of the final exam) the students were asked to write down their answer to the same two questions, and once again their answers were collected. At the close of the semester, and after each of the students who choose to participate in the research project had signed their IRB forms (74 students in total), the two data sets were analyzed to codify the learning that had taken place over the course of the semester. As was explained in the methods chapter, a constructivist's approach to grounded theory was used to code, organize, and explore the data for emergent themes and patterns of meaning. The theoretical perspective of symbolic interaction was used to guide the process, because of the emphasis it places on the constitutive and interpretive process people use to create symbolic meanings in social contexts. In addition, as will be pointed out below, the themes that emerged from the data warranted the use of an additional communication theory, which coupled nicely with the tenets of symbolic interactionism. Based on this description, the specific research question that this chapter will address is Research Question 2: *In what way can empathy instruction, from a communication standpoint, shape students understanding of empathic processes?*

The primary focus of this question was to capture longitudinal data about the students' communicative learning in Communication 3110, through the lens of empathy. Specifically, I was interested in seeing how experiential learning and communication instruction changed their working models of empathy and their understanding of the role communication plays in its production. After doing a cursory analysis of the two questions I asked students to generate the data for this research question, I realized that the quality of their answers were such that I didn't need to use the second question in my

analysis. Thus, the scope of this chapter is on exploring their answer to the first question, "How would you define empathy?" Their answers to this question alone afforded me the necessary data to compare and contrast the way the students' working models of empathy and communication changed over the course of 15 weeks. As the analysis below will show, the conceptual transformation the students' went through provide heuristic insight into the important role that communication can play in the phenomenon we have labeled empathy.

<div align="center">Message Design Logic</div>

Using a constructionist approach to grounded theory, I identified the communicative themes in each of the data sets, that is, the week 1 and week 15 definitions that the students supplied. While the choice to use the theoretical approach of symbolic interactionism proved beneficial in making sense of the data, after organizing and coding the students' responses, it became apparent that I needed to consider alternative theoretical frameworks to help explain what had emerged from the students' writing. As a result of this process, one theoretical communicative perspective emerged as an insightful way to aid me in elucidating what was revealed in the data. This theory was message design logic. Thus, before articulating the various themes that emerged from the students' responses, it is necessary to provide a base understanding of message design logic theory. Message design logic theory posits that people recognize and address communicative situations differently, depending on their own lay theoretical understanding of communication. Barbara O'Keefe (1991), the author of the theory articulates a design logic as, "…a way of thinking about communication situations,

selecting thoughts for expression, and modifying expression to meet goals." She goes on to state that essentially, "a design logic is a description of the way thoughts, transformed as messages relate to desired message outcomes" (p. 47). Ultimately, the theory argues that a person's communicative goal is shaped by their personal conceptualization of how communication functions, and the more complex the design logic, the greater the likelihood of having their goals met. In developing this theory, O'Keefe (1988) proposed the prominence of three design logic: expressive, conventional, and rhetorical.

According to O'Keefe (1997), an expressive design logic reflects reactivity, one in which a person responds to immediate messages, rather than focusing on the larger goals relevant to the situation. Expressive messages also tend to be dominated by emotional content. A conventional design logic demonstrates an appreciation for the context of a communicative situation. These messages are task relevant that reflect possible actions a person could take to accomplish a goal. They also reflect societal norms and rules for appropriate behavior, and how the performance of such behaviors are to be enacted. The third and final design logic of the theory is labeled rhetorical. A rhetorical design logic reflects a communicator's ability to address their own goals during an interaction, while simultaneously being aware of the needs and goals of their interactional partner. This ability requires a greater degree of cognitive creativity and communicative flexibility to negotiate various situations with relational competence. Furthermore, this design logic is the most sophisticated and embraces the beliefs of equifinality, and importance of the co-created nature of communication. Overall, the three design logics represent a range of thinking, from expressive being the least person-centered, to rhetorical being the most.

If we return to the dance metaphor of communication, a rhetorical dancer would be skilled at adapting their dance style to the music and the dance abilities (and steps) of their dancing partner. Being person centered, they would co-create a dance that would make the experience meaningful for both dancers. By contrast, a conventional dancer would be limited to dancing a few different traditional dances. They would only be seen as a competent dancer if the music and their dance partner knew those traditional dances as well, and could follow along. Conversely, an expressive dancer would rigidly approach each dance the same way regardless of the music, and wouldn't be afraid to step on their partner's toes.

The theory of message design logic may seem like an odd fit for a study that did not record and transcribe actual communicative messages that get uttered during an interaction. Indeed, most of the research using this theory are studies that look at different outcomes of communicative interactions, based on the various design logics, particularly as they relate to persuasion (Hullman, 2004). However, the theoretical underpinnings of the theory, as well as the different lines of research that it has spawned, make its application to this study an exciting heuristic extension of the theory. It must be remembered that the foundation of message design logic focuses on an individual's implicit theories of communication that guide their actual utterances and behaviors during an interaction. These implicit theories, or message design logic, guide the process of message construction and interpretation, and can change over time as individuals have experiences or acquire new knowledge about how communication functions and how it helps them negotiate their social worlds. Thus, while my study did not identify various design logics based on actual messages, it did explore the implicit theories that students

used to frame their understanding of the empathic communication process. There is precedence for using the theory of message design logic in this way. Edwards, Rose, Edwards, and Singer (2008) investigated 124 students' implicit models of communication (their message design logic) through questionnaires, and then asked the students to rate the level to which they felt socially supported or lonely. Thus, without looking at actual messages, these researchers found that individuals who operated from less sophisticated design logics were, in fact, lonelier and reported having less social support in their lives. There have been other studies that have used message design logic in a similar way, that is, exploring the internal working models of individuals rather than focusing on their actual communication (Edwards & Graham, 2009; Edwards & Shepard, 2007; Leichty, Willihnganz, & Hart, 2002). In light of this, my study built on the theory of message design logic by accessing the journal keepers' working models of empathic communication. Consequently, in order to provide more clarity, let me further articulate the way in which message design logic theory was applied to my research.

In creating message design logic theory, O'Keefe (1988) identified that one of the core aspects of the theory was to recognize that the more sophisticated the design logic, the more a communicator can account for and negotiate, multiple and often competing goals in a given situation. Given this, the theory posits that individuals differ in their ability to communicatively achieve their goals during an interaction, based on their working models of communication processes. The direct application of this concept, in regard to my investigation of student learning over the course of a semester, centers on empathy. By asking students to define empathy, I provided them with the situational goal to be achieved. Their definitions of empathy revealed their implicit theories of how

communication processes worked in helping them reach that goal. The data showed that at the outset of the semester a bulk of the students operated from the assumption that communication played a very minor role in the creation of empathy, and those who valued it largely operated from primitive working models of communication. However, the students' definitions of empathy in week 15 demonstrated a much more nuanced understanding of the way communication facilitates the goal of creating empathy. Comparing the data from week 1 to week 15 supported the range of communicative sophistication outlined by message design logic, that is, that the conceptual structures of the students' understanding of the communicative processes involved in the production of empathy became more complex and layered throughout the semester. Thus, by week 15 their definitions of empathy revealed a more multifarious implicit theory of communication, one that connected to various principles of a rhetorical message design logic, principles such as, equifinality, and importance of the co-created nature of empathy. With this as a backdrop, I will now delineate my analysis of the data.

Data Exploration and Analysis: Week 1 Definitions

The primary communicative themes that emerged in the students' definitions of empathy in week 1 revealed a dominant view of communication as a transmission or interactional process, and their assumption that empathy is largely a psychological, rather than relational phenomenon. This section will explicate these themes in that order. However, in order to give deeper meaning to my exploration and analysis of the data, I believe it is necessary to provide a quick review of the transmission and interactional models of communication.

The transmission model of communication surfaced in the 1940s and diagrammed communication as analogous to the way a telephone and radio function (Laswell, 1948; Shannon & Weaver, 1949). The essential components of the transmission model were: sender-message-channel-receiver-noise. This was a completely linear model of communication where a sender would fire off a message toward a target. Once the target received the message, communication had transpired. The interaction model of communication that followed it (Schram, 1954), retained the five core dimensions of the transmission model (i.e., sender-message-channel-receiver-noise), but acknowledged that communication is a two-way process, and thus needs to account for the ability of a receiver to return a message back to the sender. This feedback loop helped diagram the exchange of messages that get passed back and forth during an interaction, arguing that a communicator can be both a sender and receiver, albeit not both simultaneously.

Furthermore, the interactional model posited that a person can send multiple messages at one time; for example, verbal and nonverbal messages are being sent simultaneously. Lastly, the interactional perspective posited that a person's field of experience impacts the ability of communicators to understand and relate to another, that is to say, that the context matters. This concept of "field of experience" would be flushed out later in the transactional model of communication, where it would be argued that if both communicators share similar fields of experience (i.e., a person's culture, experiences, heredity), then an effective communicative exchange is more likely to happen. While the interaction model of communication is not as linear as the transmission model, it is built on linear components, that is, the process of sending and receiving messages, a step-by-step activity. Thus, while there are differences between the

two models, communication scholars note that both models are linear, only to varying degrees.

With this as a brief synopsis of the two models, it is important to note that their view of communication places importance on the messages that are being passed back and forth by the individual communicants. Effective communication transpires when messages get encoded and decoded appropriately, allowing for understanding to take place. Hence, skilled communicators are ones who can encode messages that have the desired impact on their target, throughout the communicative exchange (Berlo, 1966). As will be identified below, many of these themes surfaced in the way that the students defined empathy during week 1. While 74 students signed waivers consenting to participate in the study, only 71 definitions for week 1 were collected. Although I made a concerted effort to have the students write out their definitions, even those who had to miss the first day or week of class, I somehow missed three students. Nevertheless, in the methods chapter I detailed the way in which the coding process transpired for the students' definitions in both week 1 and week 15. Needless to say, I rigorously applied a constructivist approach to grounded theory by engaging in two phases of coding, open coding and focused coding. While the methods chapter provides several examples of this process, the following is a brief example to further illustrate the methodology that was used to analyze the data for this research question.

During the open coding phase, the students' definitions of empathy were dissected line by line, identifying the specific concepts that were present. For example, consider this definition: "Empathy is showing love and understanding towards others." (B-30). In this illustration three concepts are apparent: they are *showing love*, *showing*

understanding, and *acting towards another*. Of these concepts, the last one about "acting towards another" stood out when examined with the rest of the data and it proved to be the most communicative centric. Looking at the core of this concept reveals that the student who wrote this definition is operating from the belief that empathic communication is a linear process where one encodes a message and sends it "toward" a receiver. Thus, as will be shown below, the crux of this student's understanding of empathy is founded in a transmission model of communication. This is a simple example but it should suffice to demonstrate the way the data were coded. For a more detailed explication of the process, refer back to the methods. Now, with this as a prelude, the following section delineates the themes that emerged from the data for week 1.

Empathy Is Sent Toward Another

Looking at the definitions of empathy that students' generated in week 1 of the course revealed that the vast majority of students conceptualized empathy as a phenomenon that happens through a transmission or interactional process of communication. There were several ways these concepts surfaced in the journal keepers' definitions. One of those ways presented itself when the students' definitions of empathy focused on empathy as a linear process that involved an empathy giver and an empathy receiver. This perspective permeated the definitions in week 1, and became the core concept that underscored much of the conceptual understanding of empathy that students espoused. One of the ways this concept emerged was through the students' use of the word "toward." Here are three examples: *"Empathy is showing love and understanding towards others." (B-30); "Empathy is an understanding towards someone or something*

else." (A-35); and "I would define empathy as showing compassion toward someone."
(B-4). These definitions describe sending messages of love, understanding, and
compassion *toward* a target. For students' B-30 and B-4, that target is another person,
whereas student A-35 allows for the target to be some*thing*. Either way, the verbage
"towards" reveals a linear model of communication, where an empathy giver encodes an
empathic message and sends it *toward* a targeted empathy receiver. There are several
more examples I could use to illustrate this, but to do so would be redundant. For
example, B-15 used the same wording as A-35 (above), *"… showing compassion toward*
another person." The use of the word "toward" demonstrates a view of communication
as a transmission of messages.

　　Furthermore, it is interesting to note that each of the definitions above
conceptualizes empathy from the perspective of the empathy giver. Some students made
this point more explicitly than others. A-18 noted that empathy is meant for *"… someone*
in times of need, distress, and in difficult or confusing situations." Student B-33
commented that empathy was *"communicating to someone in a compassionate way when*
they feel down or need help." By conceiving of empathy in this way, the students are
further supporting a linear model of communication, because they are clearly viewing
empathy as an activity that comes from an empathy giver (i.e., a sender). They are
placing the onus on the empathy giver to "show" that they have empathy for the
distressed receiver. Thus, the word "show" made its way into many of the student
definitions. *A-16, "Empathy is caring and showing you care." A-28, "…it shows that you*
care about others." A-22, "… to understand and feel for others emotions and feelings in
a way that shows you care for them." These and many other definitions speak of empathy

as a performative action enacted by an empathy giver. Essentially, these students all articulate that it is the empathy giver's job to "show" the empathy receiver that they care, by transmitting messages that have the desired impact.

Gronbeck (1999) noted that linear models of communication are faulty because they "are bidirectional, not unidirectional; are dialogic, not monologic; and hence are processes best described not by bullets or arrows hitting targets, but rather by congregations of voices together building the frameworks of shared meanings" (p. 13). Some of the student definitions illustrated a less bidirectional definition of empathy, by acknowledging the feedback loop, where an empathic exchange consists of returning a response. However, the majority of these interactional definitions still failed to promulgate a view of empathic communication as congregations of voices building frameworks of shared meaning. The reason for this can be found in looking at some of these interactional definitions.

<u>Empathy Should Be Done Correctly</u>

One of the key components of the interactional definitions of empathy that students articulated was returning the right message back to an empathy target. One student defined empathy as, "*The ability to put yourself in other's shoes and return a response of your emotion to that experience*." (A-2). In this example, the core idea the student is communicating has to do with an empathy giver finding the *right* emotion to 'return,' and that right emotion is the one that correlates with the experience of the empathy target. Another student said it this way, "*[empathy is] the ability to understand someone else's feelings or emotions and relay that you understand how they feel…*" (B-

22) Again, the focus is on *relaying* back to an empathy target the correct emotions they are feeling. From this perspective, empathy is a communicative event that can only be felt when an empathy giver correctly identifies the emotional state of a distressed person and then crafts the accurate message that displays that knowledge. Ultimately, it is a game where the encoded message of the empathy giver acts as an arrow that either hits or misses its target. This target is hit when an empathizer *"... can actively listen and show they have listened."* (A-3) While this listen and response process is less linear than the transmission definitions, it still identifies a communicative paradigm where the key component of empathy is returning the right message. Consequently, there were other definitions that illustrated another way students considered empathy as a target to be hit.

One of the core ideas of the transmission/interaction model is that a message gets encoded and then decoded in the head of the receiver in the exact same form. This carbon copy of ideas surfaced in the students' definitions in the form of emotion. Several students believed that empathy was *"the ability to truly feel the emotion the person you're communicating with is feeling and trying to convey"* (A-8) or put another way, *"empathy means having the same feelings and emotions."* (A-21) This perspective of empathy requires an empathy giver to decode the emotional messages of an empathy receiver and then to perfectly recreate the "same feelings and emotions" within themselves, or as another student expressed it, *"to actually feel what another feels."* (A-34) This view of empathy implies that the two individuals in an empathy interaction can have the exact same emotional experience, or at least, experience emotions in an identical way. It denotes the idea that emotional constructs can be carbon copied between an empathy giver and receiver, based on the emotional messages being communicated.

Clearly such an assumption is problematic, and reductive of the unique and singular experience of any given emotional moment, a concept that will be explicated further.

Empathy Is Psychological

Recognizing the major transmission and interactional communicative themes in the students' definitions for week 1 brought to light one more important code that warrants illumination. This code emerged when the data revealed that a large number of students viewed empathy as a primarily psychological phenomenon. The strongest indicator of this came as student after student echoed the same colloquial phrase, that the essence of empathy involved *"putting yourself in someone else's shoes."* (A-10) The conceptual underpinnings of this analogy place a primacy on an empathy giver's ability to complete the mental exercise of *"imagining what they [the empathy receiver] are going through… as if you were in their shoes."* (A-15) Clearly the focus of this perspective is rooted in a predominantly psychological understanding of empathy, akin to the cognitive exercise of perspective taking. Communication scholars Trenholm and Jensen (2008) define perspective taking as a "cognitively oriented appraisal of how the other perceives himself, his situation, and his emotions" (p. 135). If empathy is understood as the ability *"see the world as another sees it"* (B-25), then even when an empathy giver seeks to relate to the emotional world of the empathy receiver, the relating process is generated by a cognitively oriented appraisal rather than the spontaneous ability to identify with another on an emotional level. Student B-14 underscored this idea in this way, *"You can truly empathize with someone when you can put yourself in someone else's position and understand exactly how they feel."* Note that this student

didn't say that placing oneself in another's shoes leads to *feeling* "exactly how another feels" (i.e., emotional contagion). Rather, this student points out that the mental exercise of putting yourself in someone else's position leads to *understanding* "exactly how they feel." Understanding is cerebral, feeling is visceral. The point of this distinction is to recognize that many students adopted empathy as a predominantly psychological process.

Another way some of the journal keepers reinforced a psychologically driven understanding of empathy, as opposed to a transactionally driven one, came in the use of the verbiage "to feel for." For example, student B-1 succinctly defined empathy as *"the ability to feel for someone and have sympathy."* They were not the only one to equate empathy with sympathy. In fact, five students used the word sympathy in their definitions, all of which described the act of 'feeling for' another. Moreover, there were other students who didn't use the word sympathy, but communicated the same concept. Student A-26 did it in this way, *"empathy is being able to feel what someone else is feeling or at least feel for them."* Student A-14 extended this concept to all living things, not just people, by defining empathy as *"feeling for other living things and their situations."* Ultimately, in conceptualizing empathy as the act of 'feeling for' another person, this cluster of students further adopted a psychological view of empathy. For them, empathy involves the mental activity of projecting a *"caring and compassionate"* (B-34) perspective into the world. This projecting activity is a completely psychological process, and doesn't require interpersonal communication in any way. From this empathic paradigm, one could be isolated from people and still engage in empathy.

Before moving on to the analysis of the students' definitions for week 15, let me summarize the themes that emerged from the week 1 definitions discussed above. A

concise summary will help frame the similarities and differences that surfaced in week

15. Thus, in looking at the major communicative themes of the journal keepers' week 1

definitions of empathy, three primary themes appeared from the data. First, the majority

of the students conceptualized empathy as a function of a transmission or interactional

process, where empathy givers send messages to empathy receivers in an attempt to hit

the bull's-eye of an empathic target. Second, the students believed that empathy involved

the transmission and recreation of emotions from a sender to a receiver, i.e., that in order

to have empathy for someone, one must feel the exact same emotions as they do.

The third major theme that surfaced revealed that a large number of students

believed that empathy was primarily a psychological process. This process includes the

cognitive exercise of perspective taking, in order to appraise and understand what it is

like to 'step into another's shoes.' It also involve the mental activity of 'feeling for'

others by projecting a caring and compassionate viewpoint towards them. To further

extenuate the transmissional and interactional underpinnings of these themes, all one

must do is compare and contrast them with the themes that emerged in week 15.

<u>Data Exploration and Analysis: Week 15 Definitions</u>

At the end of the semester, the students were asked to provide their new

understanding of what empathy was, and how it functioned. These definitions were coded

and analyzed in the same way as the definitions that they provided at the outset of the

semester. An example of the coding process was provided above and is detailed even

further in the methods chapter. In addition to using a constructivist approach to grounded

theory to code the data, I decided to apply the theory of message design logic to organize

and make sense of the way the students' described empathy. Following this process, several themes emerged from the data, themes that showed a development in their understanding of the role communication plays in the production of empathy. In all, there were six broad themes that surfaced. These framed empathy as: a co-creation, reciprocal, listening-centric, contextually complex, having equifinality, and person-centered. The remainder of the chapter will unpack each of these with great depth.

Transactional View of Communication

After analyzing the data for week 15, the biggest shift that took place in the collective minds of the students was a shift from viewing empathy through a transmission and interactional communicative lens, to one that transpires through a transactional view of communication. In the previous section, the transmissional and interactional models of communication were delineated in order to demonstrate how the data aligned with the core concepts of these models. To provide the same clarity, i.e., to show how the data for week 15 supports a transactional view of communication, Figure 2 is a diagram highlighting the key components of this model.
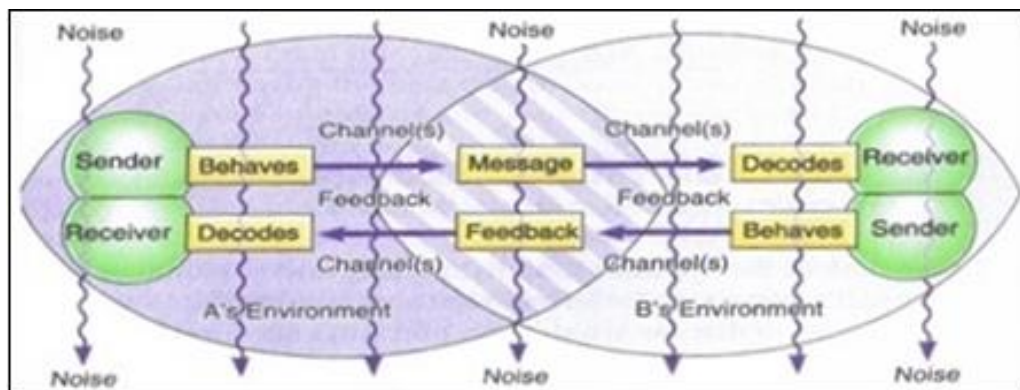

Figure 2: Transactional Communication Model (Source: rancisguennette.wordpress.com)

As the model depicts, a transactional view of communication is a nonlinear model that conceptualizes communication between individuals as a co-creation where shared meaning is generated between communicants, each of whom simultaneously acts as a sender and receiver interpreting and sending messages nonstop.

Furthermore, the shared meaning that is generated is largely based on the environment, or field of experience, that each communicator is embedded in. Ultimately, the process is a facilitated by the exchange and interpretation of symbols to fuse two perspectives into a jointly produced understanding. By week 15, the students had overwhelmingly conceptualized empathy as a result of a transactional process of communication. There were several ways this viewpoint emerged in the data. One of these ways was the expressions they used to describe how empathy was something that was *co-created between* people, rather than a commodity that gets passed from a giver to a receiver. Students described this phenomenon in different ways, for example, consider the way student A-2 expressed it. *"Empathy is the substance between people that allows people to see and understand each other in a way that demonstrates caring."* By describing it as a substance, this student is recognizing it is a tangible creation that gets produced between people. Another student describes the process in this way, *"Empathy is carrying someone's burden with them… it is a shared experience."* (A-23) According to this student, empathy is the process of "carrying... with," again a jointly produced activity. This student also describes it as a "shared experience." In fact, the phrase, "shared experience" found its way into several student definitions (A-31, A-33, A-35, B-3, B-11, B-31). It is interesting to note that the word "shared" or "sharing" did not show up once in the students' definitions for week 1, yet seven students used it in week 15. The

same is true for the word 'between.' None of the students used the word in week 1, but several students used it in week 15 (A-2, A-18, B-10, B-11). This shift in language by the students highlights the change in their thoughts about the role communication plays in empathic communication. By using this phrasing, they are demonstrating a transactional perspective, one that views communication where meanings are "shared" and created "between" or "with" another. This shift in thinking moves the students away from an interaction model where one gives and the other takes.

In speaking about two subjectivities colliding, Blumer (1969) wrote,

Taking each other into account in this mutual way not only relates the action of each to that of the other but intertwines the actions of both into what I would call, for lack of a better word, a transaction – a fitting of the developing action of each into that of the other to form a joint or overbridging action. Without going astray along esoteric lines I would say that the transaction is something other than an addition of the actions of the two individuals; these two lines of action in their developing interrelationship constitutes a singleness. (p. 109)

The transactional singleness that Blumer (1969) points to found its way into the students' definitions beyond the use of the terms "between" and "shared." It also manifested itself in the way students used the transactional concept of field of experience to create inter-relational understanding. Adler and Proctor (2014) explain the importance of accounting for fields of experience in an interaction in this way: "Communicators often occupy different environments – fields of experience that affect how they understand others' behaviors." They go on to explain that "In communication terminology, environment refers not only to physical location but also to the personal experiences and cultural background that participants bring to a conversation." (p.13). Using these transactional concepts, consider the eloquent way student A-33 captured their essence:

> *Empathy is… communication with them until you both are able to see the world from inside each other's hearts, mind, and eyes to understand feelings and behaviors through their perspective and then to mindfully connect with them and explore together this shared meaning.*

Here we see a multilayered definition in which understanding is co-created through communicative perspective taking, based on a willingness to explore an empathy partner's field of experience during an empathic interaction. It is this process that creates the singleness Blumer (1969) is talking about. Consider some other examples from the students. *"Empathy is… digging deep into your experiences to understand their experiences, and vice versa. This creates a mutual perspective and understanding"* (B-29); *"Empathy is connecting with others on common ground"* (B-17); *"Empathy is when two people find a common meaning by drawing on their experiences to express how they feel and why"* (A-13). In each of these definitions empathy participants draw on their *experiences* to communally and communicatively create a "mutual perspective," "common ground," and "common meaning." This type of thinking both values the field of experience that each empathy partner brings to the table, but also underscores the importance of "expressing" those to find "shared meaning"' This expressive meaning making process is a creative and dynamic activity. Indeed, MacIntyre (1981) supports the idea that a conversation is more than just an exchange of ideas:

> In conversations we do not only elaborate thoughts, arguments, theories, poems, dramas; we gesture, we draw, we paint, we sing. In so doing, we give structure to our thought; we interpret a reality that was already partially constituted by the interpretations of the agents engaged in the transaction. (p. 13)

With the shift to a largely transactional perspective of empathy, the students moved away from their simplistic week 1 definitions of empathy, as primarily a psychological phenomenon, to a much more complex model. Only a handful of students

in week 15 provided definitions that would constrain empathy as a solely cognitive activity. The vast majority of the students saw empathy in relational terms, using words such as, *"I would define empathy as one of the deepest and most intimate connections that one person can form with another."* (A-12) Or as a few other students noted, *"empathy is something that builds your relationships,"* (A-38) and is *"the essence of connection"* (A-19) that *"makes relationships complete."* (A-24) While these phrases may seem hyperbolic in some ways, it needs be understood that in class we discussed how empathy largely overlaps and connects to other relational concepts, such as caring, compassion, affection, and love. Thus, I believe these students are demonstrating their understanding of these course discussions by communicating that *"without empathy there is no meaning in relationships"* (A-38), because to these students it most likely means one would have to take away the caring, compassion, affection and love. Whether this interpretation is accurate or not, these and so many other definitions show a change in the collective body of students from thinking of empathy in psychological terms to thinking of it as a relational, communicative phenomenon. The number of examples I could list here would take pages, which is how dominant the shift was.

However, I feel that it needs to be noted that the fact that students spoke of empathy in relational terms does not mean their definitions did not contain psychologically driven concepts, for example, the term, *"feeling for other people"* (B-11). The difference is, in week 1, these types of terms stood alone, but in week 15, the students who used these types of phrases combined them or qualified them with relational, communicative concepts. This is how the student in the example just given did it: *"Empathy is when you feel for someone on a deep level and try to connect with them*

by creating a shared experience of caring and understanding" (B-11). Here is how

another student did it: *"I would define empathy as feeling some sort of sorrow or relief*

for how another person is feeling, then trying to help them understand that you feel that

way" (A-36). Thus, by the end of the semester, many students gained an appreciation for

the psychological as well as the relational components of empathy, demonstrating a more

complex view of the empathic process.

<div align="center">Transformative Reciprocal Communication</div>

Having outlined how students focused on the fusing of two fields of experience to

create the feelings and perspectives associated with empathy, another way that some of

the students broke away from the linear theorizing of week 1 was through articulating the

reciprocal, transformative nature of empathic communication. Rather than speaking about

an empathy giver helping or supporting an empathy receiver, in a one-sided interaction,

these students noted that an empathy dance can be transformative for both communicants.

Mead provides some insight into this process. Mead (1934) said that when "a person

learns a new language," they in essence, "get a new soul." His reasoning for this is that:

> You cannot convey a language as a pure abstraction; you inevitably in some
> degree convey also the life that lies behind it. And this result builds itself into a
> relationship with the organized attitudes of the individual who gets this language
> and inevitably brings about a readjustment of views… he becomes in that sense a
> different individual. (p. 283)

The students' definitions showed that when empathic partners engage in deep empathic

communication, they in essence learn to speak a joint language, a co-constructed

language of empathy. In doing so, their perspectives expand as they are transformed in

some way, perhaps even feeling like they have gained a new soul. Here is how some of

the students described this reciprocal, transformative transaction.

> *"Empathy is not a destination, but a journey that people share together. It is a journey that changes both people as they walk side by side in a compassionate and loving way." (B-31)*

> *"Empathy is… connecting with people in a way where there is raw authentic experiences, emotions, and wisdom being shared. I believe it's also the ability to let them as individuals and their experiences be etched into your hearts and forever change you." (A-35)*

> *"Empathy… is true ability to dig deep into vulnerability and come out with a new sense of self and a new understanding of the world." (A-19)*

These definitions provide a sample of what other students described, that is, the transformative reciprocal nature of empathic communication. Several students used the metaphor shown in the definition of B-31 above that empathy was a journey that moves both travelers, as opposed to a destination that one traveler attains. It is this communicative *journeying* process where empathy partners learn to speak a joint empathy language, a process that many students felt was the result of reciprocal sharing of "raw authentic experiences and emotions." Through this journey, or process, of vulnerable communication, "new souls" are formed, or as A-19 expressed it, *"a new sense of self and a new understanding of the world."* However, it is essential to note that this transformative process is not one sided or unidirectional. These students are using a design logic that denotes a transactional process of communication where the meanings and significance of their collaboration is a result of the verbal and nonverbal gestures that are jointly produced in response to each other. It is out of this dance that a communal empathy language is forged, one that has transformative power for both people involved. Blumer (1969) described this formative, and ultimately transformative process in this way:

> Social interaction is a formative process… [one in which] people in interaction are not merely giving expression to determining factors in forming their respective lines of action but are directing, checking, bending, and transforming their lines of action in light of what they encounter in the actions of others. (p. 53)

For many students in the class, it was the "bending" together and "transforming" aspects of symbolic interaction that proved most memorable by the end of the semester. Perhaps this student captured the idea most concisely: *"Empathy is when two or more people care about each other enough to melt together in true understanding. When this happens, everyone involved is transformed into something more than they were, because when we let others in, we expand"* (B-6).

 In using a transactional design logic of communication to highlight the reciprocal and transformative nature of it, students articulated the nature of communication they felt facilitated that transformation, as some the definitions in the previous section demonstrate. One of these communicative features was the concept of listening. Exploring the data, in light of the learning the students demonstrated over the course of the semester, helps explain why.

<div align="center">Empathic Listening</div>

In formulating their new design logic for empathy, many of the students identified the communicative act of listening as being central to the process of empathy production. As noted at the outset of this study, one of the research goals was to capture the learning that took place for students over the course of the semester. Looking at the students' new understanding of empathic listening helped to distinguish which of the course concepts related to listening resonated with them the most. Given their definitions, it appears that the students internalized a chapter they read during the semester from the book "Difficult

Conversations" by Stone, Patton, and Heen (1999), as well as a class session we had on "fully listening."

The authors of the book, *Difficult Conversations,* were members of the Harvard Negotiation Project and codified their research on the project by composing a book that focuses on creating positive communication patterns in challenging relational moments. One of their chapters centers on listening, it is a chapter the students read during the semester. In this chapter, Stone, Patton, and Heen (1999) posit that when it comes to listening, "the single most important thing… is to shift [ones] internal stance from 'I understand' to 'help me understand'" (p. 167). The internal shift they speak about seems to directly mirror the shift that many of the students in the course went through in their conceptualization about listening. While a handful of students spoke of listening in week 1, they did so to stress the importance of an empathy giver to listen and identify the emotions of an empathy receiver, so they could transmit the correct response back to the receiver. This is a much different design logic than the one students used to speak of listening in week 15. Rather than focusing on showing empathy receivers they understood by reporting back the accurate emotions, like an arrow hitting its target, by the last week of the semester students expressed the role of listening to be transactional in nature, one in which the focus was on creating an open flow of dialogue built around curiosity as opposed to correctness and precision. Here is a direct comparison of the students theorizing about listening from week 1 to week 15.

Week 1:

> *"When someone can actively listen and show that they listened." (A-3)*

> *"Empathy is the result of being a good listener to demonstrate you understand someone's crappy or hard situation." (B-9)*

"When we have empathy we are good listeners, and we just try to relate." (B-24)

"How you listen to others emotions, and show you relate to them." (B-28)

Week 15:

"Empathy is fully listening, trying to understand and possibly being able to relate to a person's story whether you know them or not but keeping in mind where they are coming from and having no judgment" (A-11)

"Empathy is being an active and ethical listener to let someone feel heard and emotionally validated." (A-18)

"The skills of listening to someone without judgment or pity and then communication with them until you both are able to see the world inside each other's hearts, minds, and eyes." (A-33)

"Empathy is trying to listen and understand with an open mind so you can try and see where someone is coming from, to better understand, relate, and connect with them." (B-2)

In these definitions, some striking communicative shifts take place. The students'

definitions from week 1 purport that being a good listener means "showing" or

"demonstrating" to another the ability to regurgitate what was said and felt. These are

incapacious models of listening that focus on listening as an act of finality, one in which

closure is reached when an empathy giver accurately demonstrates they can psychologize

the internal experiences of the empathy receiver. From this design logic, listening is an

operational skill that can be deployed during an interaction to activate feelings of

empathy in an intended target. Thus in week 1, the students viewed listening as a

psychological process built around a set of skills that needed to be embodied. Parker

Palmer provides insight into how the students' might have generated this perspective as

they entered the class at the outset of the semester. He comments that our Western culture

is one that focuses "on the development of [communication] skills to manipulate the

external world rather than skills to go within…" and cultivate "inner awareness" and

"spirituality." (Palmer, 1994, p. 27). The students' "external" and "skill" oriented definitions support this argument.

By week 15, the students had collectively moved away from their previous conceptualization of listening, and adopted a new one, as evidenced in the sample of definitions provided above. These definitions adopt an appreciation for the inner world of the listener, and the subject positions they bring to an interaction. By pointing out that an empathic listener should be "non-judgemental" (A-11, A-30, A-33, B-1, B-25, etc.), and "open," (A-17, A-20, A-26, B-2, etc.) the students moved listening away from a game of accuracy, toward an ethical choice and a communicative activity that involves vulnerable acceptance of the complexities of another. Furthermore, the students' revised definitions acknowledge the limitations of an interactional or transmission model of communication where reconstructing someone's thoughts or emotions accurately in your own head is the key to good communication. Conversely, the week 15 definitions note that the best an empathic communicator can do is *"trying to understand and possibly being able to relate."* (A-11) This type of language frames listening as an activity that is an ongoing effort towards creating meaning and understanding, not an achievement that has closure when responses are "correct." The students' emergence of this language comes directly out of our class discussions where I talked about "fully listening, rigorous listening," or "holistic listening." These are words that I used in the class to describe listening as a composite between skill and will. As noted early, this language is also a reflection of the course readings they engaged in. For example, note how Stone, Patton, and Heen (1999) frame empathic listening.

> As an empathic listener, you are on a journey… [but] you will never 'arrive.' You will never be able to say, 'I truly understand you.' We are all too complex for

that, and our skills to imagine ourselves into other people's lives too limited. But in a sense this good news. Psychologists have found that we are each more interested in knowing that the other person is *trying* to empathize with us – that they are willing to struggle to understand how we feel and see how we see – than we are in believing that they have actually accomplished that goal. Good listening, as we've said, is profoundly communicative. And struggling to understand communicates the most positive message of all. (p. 184)

This is a direct quote from a chapter the students read during the semester.

Clearly, these concepts made an impression on some of the students, as is reflected in their notion that the key to empathic listening is *"desperately trying to understand"* (A-9, week 15) not *"showing you understand"* (A-3, week 1). Furthermore, by shifting the focus away from trying to accurately demonstrate to another the ability to recreate their internal state in one's own mind, students outlined empathic listening as one that centers on exploring another's world, rather than recreating it. Consequently, the modification students made toward viewing empathic listening and empathy in general as a result of a transactional process provided only half of the picture, when looking at the students overall communicative learning. Indeed, when applying O'Keefe's (1988) three message design logic more rigorously, further insight was generated, which demonstrated a completely different layer of understanding the students achieved through the semester.

Contextualized Design Logic

The introduction to this chapter previewed that, after exploring the data, two larger patterns arose that connected with the theorizing of message design logic. The first of these was that the students' lay theories about communication in general changed over the course of the semester. The previous section delineated the themes that arose from this broader perspective of looking at design logics. However, a second application of

message design logic surfaced in the data. This pattern connected elements of the

students' definitions directly with O'Keefe's (1997) three design logics. The definitions

for the first week of the semester revealed that some students conceptualized empathic

communication aligning with two features of an expressive design logic. These are: first,

that an expressive design logic centers on reactivity, where communicants provide an

immediate response to their conversant; and second, that an expressive design logic tends

to be focused on the emotional aspect of messages. The first of these, that is, the focus on

providing an immediate response, was explained in the previous section. Recall that two

of the themes that surfaced in the analysis of week 1 definitions was a tendency that some

students had to focus on "responding" correctly to the immediate messages of distress

communicated by an "empathy receiver." Consequently, in imagining empathy in this

way, the student definitions also showed the second aspect of an expressive design logic,

namely, to see empathic communication in terms of responding to emotional messages.

Here are a few examples from the student definitions in week 1 that highlight this.

> *"Empathy is understanding and reacting appropriately to someone's viewpoint on emotion situations." (A-11)*

> *"Empathy is being able to understand someone's emotions and let them know you know why they're feeling that way." (A-32)*

> *"The ability to understand someone else's feelings or emotions and be able to relay you understand how they feel." (B-22)*

> *"How you listen to others emotions, and show you relate to them." (B-28)*

These examples capture the essence of what other definitions for week 1 expressed,

specifically, that empathic communication is about reading the emotional messages of an

individual and then forming an immediate reaction that demonstrates an understanding of

their emotions. While the focus here is on reacting to emotional messages, it needs to be

acknowledged that drawing the connection between the data and these two expressive design logic themes falls a little short of capturing the gravitas of their use, as conceptualized in O'Keefe's (1988) original theory. Because O'Keefe is looking at actual messages, rather than definitions, she notes that an expressive design logic reflects reactivity, where a person responds to a prior message instead of focusing on goals relevant to the situation, and their communication is often abrasive and unedited (O'Keefe, 1988). Clearly, the definitions provided by the students do not qualify for abrasive or unedited message responses. However, this doesn't take away from that fact that by focusing on reacting to the immediate emotional messages of a potential empathy receiver, these students are aligning themselves with specific features of an expressive design logic. Moreover, the magnitude of this line of thought became even more pronounced after analyzing the data for week 15.

By comparing and contrasting the definitions from week 1 to week 15, it became evident that by the end of the semester, many students crafted definitions that conceptually progressed from an expressive design logic to a conventional and rhetorical design logic. As was pointed out earlier, the conventional design logic demonstrates an appreciation for the context of a communicative situation. Messages of this type are task relevant and reflect possible actions a person could take to accomplish a goal (O'Keefe, 1997). These qualities appeared in the thinking of various students by week 15. In particular, students showed an appreciation for the contextual factors that play a role in empathic communication. Some of these were pointed out previously in looking at the way the students recognized the importance of field of experience during empathy transactions. But to further acknowledge this point, and to further highlight this aspect of

a conventional design logic, here are a couple of examples.

> *"If we listen, speak, recall past experiences and problem solve current ones with empathy, we can come to much better conclusions and overall understanding."* (A-14)

> *"Empathy is not judging others, it is accepting who they are and the situation that they are facing."* (B-17)

Note that these definitions value the context the communicants are embedded in, and the way these shape and influence the empathic communicative process. They also shift away from focusing on finding the right, appropriate reactions to emotion messages. None of these definitions talks about responding in a way that shows one can correctly identify the emotions of a distressed person. Rather, they each leave room for an empathic process that can involve listening to reach better conclusions, not immediate responses. This modification of thought, in comparison to the week 1 definitions, shows attributes of a conventional design logic. Moreover, by valuing the context of a communication event, individuals who operate from a conventional design logic value the "roles and norms" of the individuals involved and that frame the transaction (O'Keefe, Lambert, & Lambert, 1997, p. 38). Thus when student B-33 defined empathy as, "*the ability to relate with another person by calling upon your roles to relate with their roles based on what they are going through,*" they were, to some degree, aligning their thinking with a conventional design logic. Not only did they show an appreciation for the way roles can shape an empathic conversation, they also demonstrated a deference to the precipitating events that gave rise to the context of the empathic transaction. This capitulation progressed their thinking from the expressive design logic that was so prevalent at the outset of the class, which failed to account for either the context or the roles of the individuals involved.

In addition to connecting their thoughts to a conventional design logic, many of the students advanced their thinking to show elements of a rhetorical design logic by the end of the semester. O'Keefe (1997) articulates that a rhetorical design logic denotes a communicator's ability to address their own goals during an interaction, while simultaneously being aware of the needs and goals of their interactional partner, thus embodying a more person-centered approach to communication. This ability requires a greater degree of cognitive creativity and communicative flexibility to negotiate various situations with relational competence. Furthermore, this design logic is the most sophisticated and embraces the beliefs of equifinality and the importance of the co-created nature of communication. Some of these qualities found their way into many of the definitions that students provided in week 15. One student definition in particular highlights many of these qualities. Consider how this student defined empathy.

> *This semester I have learned that empathy like happiness is a process, a journey, not a destination. I can describe empathy with these words. Experiencing and expressing vulnerability, overcoming shame, creating emotional connection through love maps, working peacefully through conflict, hearing the spoken and the unspoken, being heard, being real, seeing the sunset, recognizing and responding to bids for connection which ultimately allows us to have real-ationships. (A-8)*

At first glance, this definition might seem confusing and convoluted to anyone that didn't take the course. Concepts like, "seeing the sunset" and "love-maps" would need clarification in order to make sense of the layers of meanings that are present. However, for anyone who took the class, this definition would actually make perfect sense because it provides a constellation of core concepts that were taught throughout the semester, from a variety of readings (i.e., different authors and theoretical perspectives), as well as from some of the class discussions and lessons. Ultimately, this student was

showing that their understanding of empathy is not built on an expressive or conventional design logic, but rather, it is built on a very complex framework of concepts that highlight empathy as an organic and creative process, one that is also person-centered and co-created, and a phenomenon that can happen with equifinality. In essence, this definition contains the core elements of a rhetorical design logic. Before delineating how this definition supports those rhetorical concepts, it is important to note that this student was not alone in their thinking, as other students in week 15 provided definitions that drew upon specific concepts from the course that connected with elements of a rhetorical design logic. In order to show this, additional definitions provided by students will be used to supplement the analysis of the definition above.

<u>Equifinality</u>

Watzlawick, Beavin, and Jackson (1967) explained that, "the principle of equifinality means that the same results may spring from different origins, because it is the nature of the organization which is determinate" (p. 127). The array of ways students conceptualized empathic communication in week 15 reinforced the equifinality of their definitions. Many of those differences have already been highlighted. However, some students showed equifinality within their own definitions, as is the case with the definition provided by student A-8 above. By bringing in a conglomeration of concepts, this student demonstrated the belief that empathy can be composed in a variety of ways, for example, through reciprocal *"vulnerability"* and *"emotional connection through love maps."* (A-8) While these are very different processes, this student recognized that both could lead to creating feelings of empathy in a relationship.

To further illustrate the way this rhetorical design logic precept surfaced, here are two other examples that show equifinality in some of the students thinking. The first example comes from the way this student defined empathy as *"being able to feel somebody else's pain, happiness, sorrow, excitement, and being able to be fully happy for them, sad for them, angry for them, excited for them, and actually care about how that person feels…"* (A-9) This definition shows a shift in thinking that simply was not present in the students' week 1 definitions, namely, that empathy can be produced through the communication of both light and dark emotions. At the outset of the semester, all of the students identified or implied that empathy was a response to a distressed person (i.e., someone experiencing dark emotions). Clearly, student A-9 extended and problematized this line of the thought by positing that empathy can be cultivated in other ways. A second example that highlights the equifinality of student thinking in week 15 stems from this definition. *"In order to grow, to learn, to love, to change, to comfort, to live, and to help others do the same, we must have empathy for ourselves and for others…"* (A-19) Once again, this student was introducing a concept that did not show up at all in the week 1 definitions, namely, the idea that one can have empathy for the self, which involves intrapersonal communication. By combining this idea, with the far more common idea that empathy is something that is created relationally, this student demonstrates another form of equifinality in their theorizing about empathy.

These are just two of many examples that show the progressed complexity and equifinality of the students' definitions in week 15. It is important to state that both of the concepts these two students focus on (i.e., self-empathy, and empathy via light emotions)

were concepts that were discussed in the class during the semester, thus showing the

learning that took place in these students. However, it was the works of Brene Brown

(2007), John Gottman (1995), Carl Rogers (1957), and Stone, Patton, and Heen (1999),

that seem to have the made the biggest impact on the collective thinking of the students.

Elements from these authors found their way into many of the student definitions,

pushing them toward a more complex rhetorical design logic. For example, one of the

reasons student A-8's definition was spotlighted earlier was that it contains concepts from

all of these authors. Here is another look at that definition, giving credit to the source that

formulated the concepts contained in the definition.

> *This semester I have learned that empathy like happiness* (course lectures) *is a process, a journey, not a destination. I can describe empathy with these words. Experiencing and expressing vulnerability* (Brown, 2007)*, overcoming shame* (Brown, 2007)*, creating emotional connection through love maps* (Gottman, 2002)*, working peacefully through conflict* (Stone, Patton, & Heen, 1999), *hearing the spoken and the unspoken, being heard, being real, seeing the sunset* (Rogers, 1980), *recognizing and responding to bids for connection* (Gottman, 1995) *which ultimately allows us to have real-ationships* (course lectures). (A-8)

The communicative backing for each of these concepts varies, thus creating

equifinality, but taking a closer look at the different communicative dynamics involved

with each underscores the sophisticated level of communicative theorizing the students

attained over the course of the semester, especially in regards to the creation and co-

creation of empathy. One of these communicative dynamics that helped move the student

toward a rhetorical design logic was the way they acknowledged the necessity of being

person-centered during an empathic transaction. O'Keefe (1988) states that an individual

who uses a rhetorical design logic values the personhood of both communicants in "the

creation and negotiation of social selves and situations" (p. 85). Collectively, by week 15

the students demonstrated an appreciation for this type of communication.

Person-Centeredness

At first glance, it appeared that the students in week 1 were also crafting definitions that valued a person-centered communicative approach to empathic communication, and in some ways this is correct. However, exploring the nuances of their definitions, in comparison to the definitions they provided in week 15, reveals that a far deeper level of communicative person-centered theorizing appeared later in the semester.

As noted earlier, the three primary concepts surrounding empathy that the students embraced in week 1 dealt with the ability of the empathy giver to take the perspective of the distressed empathy receiver, the ability of the "empathy giver" to feel for an "empathy receiver," and the ability of an empathy giver to craft messages that showed they could understand and even recreate the emotional state of a distressed empathy receiver. While these themes can be seen as person-centered, in that they focus on seeing things from another person's point of view, feeling for another person, and sending messages that show they understand the emotions of another person, they are also somewhat vague, broad, linear, and psychologically driven concepts. When compared to the person-centered themes that the collective students formed in week 15, a continuum of person-centeredness is formed, and it is possible to see how the students progressed along that continuum throughout the semester. Specifically, by week 15 the person-centered themes that the students generated focused on specific communicative concepts that were more narrowly focused, as opposed to vague or broad. They also focused on the importance of relationship, rather than on a one-size fits all approach to empathic communication. Moreover, they valued the personhood of both participants, as

opposed to a linear, one-sided transmission. The rest of this chapter will highlight each of these person-centered themes, further illustrating the students shift toward embracing a rhetorical design logic.

<u>Valuing Narrowly Focused and Specific Person-Centered Concepts</u>

Identifying the person-centeredness of the students' definitions revealed an interesting communicative dynamic, particularly in comparing the week 1 definitions with those of week 15. To understand the differences, it is necessary to revisit some of the major themes of week 1. These week 1 themes, at first glance, appear to display person-centered tones, as they speak of considering an-other in an empathic interaction. However, as was stated above, it is essential to note that they did so using vague and broad concepts. In order to be more concrete, some of the major themes in the week 1 definitions were: Taking the perspective of another, feeling for another, feeling the same emotions as the other, showing another person you understand where they are coming from, and listening to another.

Comparing and contrasting these themes with the person-centered themes of students' week 15 definitions reveals that by the end of the semester, the collective understanding of the students had become more nuanced and specific. The best example of this emerged in the students theorizing about listening. While the previous section pointed out the transactional shift students made in conceptualizing empathic listening, looking at the person-centeredness of their design logics revealed another layer of communicative insight that the students gained. Recall that in a preceding segment, it was pointed out that the students described empathic listening using broad terms and phrases

such as, "active listening," "being a good listener," and "the ability to listen." None of the definitions in week 1 clarified what the student meant by these phrases, as their definitions failed to be specific. Conversely, by week 15, the students used specific and concrete concepts related to listening, concepts that move from a more general approach to listening to a more targeted and personal person-centered approach. Some of the phrases that students used by week 15, in regard to empathic listening, were: being an *"ethical listener to let someone feel heard and emotionally validated"* (A-18), *"trying to listen and understand with an open mind"* (B-2), *"truly listen not only with your ears but with your heart"* (B-12), *"allow ourselves to listen and understand why it makes us feel the way it does, it is opening yourself to allow yourself to feel the feelings you get and accept them"* (B-18), *"listen to someone and share their enduring vulnerabilities without judgment"* (B-21), and *"listen and understand by letting them feel the way they feel"* (B-22).

Clearly, by the close of the semester the students had developed a more layered understanding of the role listening played in their definitions of empathy. The phrases they used list specific characteristics of empathic listening, for example, the importance of being nonjudgmental, open, and accepting of all emotions. These particular listening attributes were components of several course lectures and course readings. Furthermore, these definitions moved the students away from their broad definitions of week 1 by showing greater value for the person-hood of their empathy partner. They did this through talking about listening to the "enduring vulnerabilities" of the other, listening to "emotionally validate" the other, listening "not with your ears but with your hearts," and listening as an "ethical choice." These are specific concepts that were covered in the

course that recognize distinctive types or ways of listening, types that show a greater focus for the person-hood of their empathy partner. For instance, Gottman's (2002) concept of enduring vulnerabilities invites a listener to show empathic compassion and understanding for the very personal traumatic experiences that someone has experienced. Rogers (1980) notion to "listen not only with your ears but with your heart" invites a very personal type of listening that provides encouragement and support for the immanent experiences of an empathy partner. Brown's (2007) belief that empathic listeners emotionally validate their empathy partners shows a deeper respect for the unique and rich emotional life of an empathy partner. While listening as an ethical choice is a concept that was constantly talked about throughout the semester and centers on a total commitment to invest and be present with an empathy partner. Each of these concepts, as well as the listening characteristics students identified, move their thinking from general to specific, and from global to very personal, thus connecting them to a more sophisticated, rhetorical design logic.

Beyond listening, there were other ways that the students communicative design logics became more person-centered by week 15. Consider the language and concepts the students used in these definitions.

> *"Empathy is a compassionate heart that yearns to understand someone's situation and forgive their mistakes." (A-7)*

> *"Empathy is to genuinely care about your relationship with another person... and the courage and ability to forgive." (B-5)*

> *"Empathy is an emotion turned into an action…it is complete selfless love in action. It involves trust, sincerity, and responding to the needs and bids of others." (A-24)*

> *"I believe it is the unveiling love one can show for another. It comes with no judgment and complete feelings of trust." (B-30)*

Rather than talking about "feeling for another," and "taking the perspective of another," as many students did in week 1, these, and other week 15 definitions bring in specific person-centered communicative concepts such as love, forgiveness, trust, sincerity, and responding to needs and bids. These concepts provide layers of person-centeredness that did not surface at the outset of the semester. For example, in week 1, students talked about "taking the perspective of another." While this is person-centered, it is a cognitive exercise focused on trying to see a situation from another's point of view. This exercise can be done with or without a person present, and does not necessarily require a communicative transaction with another to complete the exercise. Consequently, trying to understand the other's perspective by exploring their worlds together because one genuinely cares and loves them brings a much richer person-centered process into play and a stronger motivation driving the process. Burleson's (2009) research on emotional supporting communication posits that highly person-centered messages "explicitly recognize and legitimize the other's feelings and encourage the recipient to elaborate and explore those feelings" (p. 24). Thus, while taking the perspective of another is a person-centered cognitive exercise, communicatively exploring those feelings, recognizing the emotional needs and bids of others, and empathically engaging another to meet those needs, is a higher level of person-centeredness in co-creating an empathy dance.

An additional way the students demonstrated their appreciation for a more person-centered, rhetorical design logic was the way they showed greater value for the role that relationships play in an empathic transaction. This development in their thinking pushed them to recognize that an empathic dance will vary based on the relationship that exists

between empathy partners, thus moving their thinking away from a one-size fits all approach to empathic communication by showing a deference to the idiosyncratic and relational nature of it. For example, the definition provided by student B-5 (listed directly above) posits that empathy *"is to genuinely care about your relationship with the other person."* Furthermore, by conjoining this thought to the concept of "forgive"ness, the student is bringing in a uniquely relational dimension to their understanding of empathy. Connecting these concepts acknowledges that empathy is often born out of relational injury and a necessary component to forgive relational transgressions. Moreover, the students' definitions acknowledged that empathic communication is not something one person does *to* others; it is something that someone does *with* another, a process that builds and transforms specific relationships. Student A-25 articulated it in this way, *"you bond with the person and build a connection with the person."* Other students echoed the same beliefs with these words: *"Empathy is what makes relationships authentic. It is what is required for people to be really connected."* (B-14); and empathy *"is crucial in making and building relationships."* (B-5) By valuing the unique and personal nature of relationships, the students aligned themselves with a rhetorical design logic, acknowledging that communication does more than just accomplish tasks, it forms and influences relationships.

In an essay on the ethics of a personal relationship, John Hardwig (2002), a recognized scholar in philosophy and an emeritus professor from the University of Tennessee, posits that impersonal and quasipersonal relationships are those where the roles being fulfilled are interchangeable. By contrast, he argues that in personal relationships, "I want you. You and your well-being are then one of my ends," thus, "the

persons in personal relationships are not substitutes" (Hardwig, 2002, p. 343). If this position is adopted, then the students' use of framing empathy in terms of building and fostering personal relationships is a more person-centered design logic, in comparison to their expressive design logic in week 1 which failed to acknowledge the role relationships played in the production of empathy. Embracing Hardwig's (2002) perspective, it can be argued that a greater depth of person-centeredness is possible when the individuals in an empathic conversation have a deeply personal relationship, one in which the roles they play in each other's lives cannot be substituted by anyone else. By adding the relational dimension to their definitions in week 15, the students were demonstrating a more sophisticated design logic that acknowledges that communicating empathically does not just accomplish something (i.e., feelings of empathy), it builds something (i.e., empathic relationships). However, beyond this relational dimension, the students demonstrated another layer of person-centeredness in their definitions, one that valued diversity.

In week 1, the students' definitions showed a lack of terminology or words that connected the concept of empathy with the notion of accepting or being open to difference and diversity. In fact, at the outset of the semester, only one student used the word *"open"* (B-18), and they did so only to talk about an empathy receiver opening up to an empathy giver. By contrast, there were a dozen definitions in week 15 that used the word *"open,"* many of which did so to express the idea that empathy involved having *"an open mind"* (B-2), or communication that is *"open, and nonjudgmental"* (B-10). Student B-15 captured the essence of this new dimension of thinking with this definition, *"Empathy is the ability to accept someone that is different from you and taking the time to give them a full, non-biased, open heart."* Using a design logic that embraces diversity

and seeks to find connection admits differing backgrounds is a central component of a rhetorical design logic. In fact, this was one of the reasons that Barbour et al. (2013) recently advocated using the theory of message design logic to advance our understanding of organizational change. This group of researchers posited that by embracing a rhetorical design logic, organizations could create productive dialogues that successfully manage the diverse people and eclectic relationships that are present in organizations, communicative dynamics that often lead to division, misunderstandings, and conflict. They point out that a rhetorical design logic is open and inviting, looking for connections rather than divisions.

Thus, by embracing this element of a rhetorical design logic, the students advanced their thinking about how empathic communication can transpire toward a more person-centered process that is about *"accepting differences and understanding them without judging them,"* (B-32) *"regardless of how different their background is from you."* (A-15) Clearly, a design logic built around this view of empathetic communication would be more flexible and open to a variety of subjectivities, regardless of how well they match up with one's own subject positions. It is easy to understand how this shift in the students' thinking would forge new ways of communicating during an empathic transaction, ways in which empathy partners can create inviting spaces for vulnerability and personal connection, rather than putting up walls because of perceived differences. Moreover, this change in the students' thinking highlights another rhetorical design logic theme that emerged in week 15, namely, the importance of valuing the personhood of both empathy partners.

<u>Valuing the Personhood of Both Participants</u>

The final way the students demonstrated a more sophisticated, person-centered design logic was the way they progressed in their thinking about personhood and identity during an empathic transaction. In week 1, the majority of the students constructed definitions of empathy that placed the empathic focus on an empathy giver sending messages to help an empathy receiver, a linear communicative model that ignored the needs, identities, and personhood of the both of the empathic partners. In fact, some students went so far as to try to remove the personhood of the empathy giver altogether. Here are three examples from the week 1 definitions. "*Empathy is being able to rid our own self and step into another's perspective."* (B-23) And another student believed that *"empathy is the ability to put yourself in their shoes; to be able to remove yourself from your own element..."* (B-26) Finally, a third student specified, *"empathy is stepping outside of yourself and into someone else and truly seeing who they are without any influence from you"* (A-27). These definitions reflect the belief that, first, it is possible to "rid," "remove," or "step outside" of your "self" in an empathic exchange; and second, that empathy is exclusively about the personhood of the receiver. The idea that empathy is about completely focusing on the other person, that is, the empathy receiver, was an underpinning of many of the week 1 definitions. Intuitively, it is easy to see how some of the students could arrive at this conclusion in thinking about empathy, because of their collective use of a transmission design logic that believes it is possible to step out of one's own shoes and into those of someone else. However, Fisher and Adams (1994) counter this belief by explaining that:

> Person perception occurs in a mutually shared field. When you perceive another, the other person is engaged in the same process of person perception you are. The

implication of this mutually shared field is that your behavior in any given situation with another may be the basis for another's behaviors which in turn becomes the sense data for your perception of the other. (p. 73)

As these communication scholars explain, it is impossible to wholly remove your *self* from an interaction because your very being and actions influence the perception and actions of another interlocutor. Hence, it is not possible to "step outside of yourself" and into another's shoes because our communicative efforts to do so influence the way an individual walks in their own shoes. By the end of the semester, it appears that many of the students grasped this concept, as only three students chose to cling to the analogy of stepping into the shoes of someone else (B-5, B-20, and B-27). Consequently, by moving away from this analogy (to a large degree in comparison to its use in week 1) the collective understanding of the students seemed to recognize that an empathy partner cannot take off his or her own shoes to try on the shoes of another. The transactional design logic of their week 15 definitions (as delineated above) demonstrates that they gained an appreciation that the best an empathic partner can do is to is walk side by side, or create an empathy dance where each partner moves simultaneously with the other, each wearing their own shoes.

To highlight this further, by week 15, the students' definition showed an absence of the belief that an empathy giver should "remove" or "rid" the "self" in order to generate empathic communication. Rather, definitions surfaced that posited that it is necessary for an empathy partner to put their "self" and identity more fully into the empathic transaction. The ways in which students articulated this concept varied. For example, some students drew upon Brene Brown's (2007) notion of investing "whole-heartedly" into an empathy conversation. The students were introduced to her research on

whole-hearted empathy early in the semester and their definitions showed that it clearly made an impression on some of the students. As student A-5 expressed it, *"Empathy I believe is the ability to whole heartedly feel how someone is feeling and draw on their emotions. I've learned true empathy in this class by applying my life into their situations."* Similarly, student A-20 felt that empathy is co-created, when *"you are completely allowing someone to open up and you to them whole-heartedly."* The idea that empathic communication involves putting your whole heart into the transaction is the antithesis of "removing" the self from an interaction. Other students expressed the same idea in these words, *"empathy is giving every ounce of yourself to understand and relate to people"* (B-9), empathy involves *"communication with them until you both are able to see the world from inside each other's hearts, mind, and eyes"* (A-33), and empathy is *"when you experience another person through yourself."* (B-14) Each of these students recognized that it is impossible for an empathy "giver" to focus solely on an empathy "receiver," because the personhood of both individuals creates the communicative empathic dance.

In addition to recognizing that empathy communicants cannot remove their personhood from an interaction, there were some students that complicated the notion of personhood further by acknowledging that individuals bring multiple subject positions and identities into any given interaction. Consider the words of student B-10, *"Empathy happens between people when they share different aspects of their selves with each other in open, nonjudgmental, and vulnerable ways in order to understand and connect."* By subscribing to the notion of "selves," this student values the way subjectivity plays a role in any empathic event. Keller (2007) outlines the importance of such a position by

arguing that,

> Subjects are epiphenomena, constructed by culturally specific discursive regimes (marked by race, gender, sexual orientation, and so on), and subjectivity itself is more properly viewed as the consequence of actions, behavior, or performativity than as sources… selves are multiple and fractured rather than unitary, mobile rather than stable, porous rather than enclosed, externally constituted rather than internal or 'inner' natural essences. (p. 353)

Viewing empathic communication through such a lens brings deeper meaning to the whole notion of empathy, and provides added layers to a transactional design logic. By positing that subjectivity is largely the consequence of communicative rather than psychological processes, the idea of "selves" highlights the constitutive nature of symbolic interaction. Indeed, Mead (1913) believed that the "social self" is created through a process where individuals judge their own self-concept and their opinions based on their interactions and the reactions of other people. Thus, while an empathy partner's subject positions are a mix of their prior social and cultural transactions, they are also influenced by what is reflected back at them *during* an empathic interaction. Student B-19 supported this conceptualization of subjectivity in their definition: *"Empathy materializes when we connect our identities and backgrounds with the identities and backgrounds of another in a way that causes feelings of validation and understanding."* The refined level of thinking by this student, acknowledges that people are a multiplicity of identities, built and shaped by subject positions and the enactment of those positions. It takes into account the agency individuals have, that is, the agency to choose which identities to share during an empathic exchange, as they work collaboratively to find validated meanings and understanding.

These student definitions and the others like them show an alignment with a community of scholars who are inviting the academic community and beyond to consider

how discussions about empathy often oversimplify conceptualizations about identity. Eric

Pritchard, a rhetorical scholar who explores empathy as it relates to teen suicide and

bullying in the LGBTQ community, has provided one such perspective. Pritchard (2013)

asserts:

> Individuals conceive of themselves with more complexity than many notions of identity enable. Listing their identities, they show a consciousness of complex personhood. This reading of identity is very different from a definition that takes identities to be mutually exclusive instead of co-constructing and fluid. (p. 327)

The way in which some of the students articulated the importance of "identities"

and "selves" highlights the notion of complex personhood that Pritchard is describing,

and opens up new possibilities for empathic connection and understanding. Furthermore,

by acknowledging this aspect of empathic communication, the students demonstrated a

more complex conceptualization of empathic communication, one that aligns with the

more sophisticated level of thought found in a rhetorical design logic. Hart (2002)

underscores this notion by pointing out that, "within the rhetorical logic, communication

is fluid and flexible – a process of creation where *selves* and situations are negotiated."

He goes on to emphasize that this type of communication is different from the other two

design logics "where *identity* and context are 'given' or 'fixed,' which in turn restricts

people's ability to see the personhood of the other in more complex ways" (Hart, 2002, p.

114). Thus, providing definitions that not only value the personhood of both empathy

partners, and by articulating the complex nature of their personhood, the students

demonstrated their ability to move from adopting elements of an expressive and

conventional design logic, to a more layered and multifaceted rhetorical design logic.

Conclusions

This chapter has looked at the way the students' definition of empathy changed over the course of the semester, through the lens of communication. The communication theory of message design logic was used to help explain and analyze the longitudinal data provided by the students over the course of 15 weeks. The definitions collected in week 1 of the semester produced three major themes. These were the following: first, that the majority of the students conceptualized empathy as a function of a transmission or interactional process where empathy givers send messages to empathy receivers in an attempt to hit the "'correct" empathy target; second, that the students believed that empathy involved the transmission and recreation of emotions from a sender to a receiver, i.e., an empathy sender must feel the exact same emotions as the empathy receiver; and third, that a large number of students believed that empathy was primarily a psychological process that is built around the cognitive exercise of perspective taking, and the mental activity of "feeling for" others by projecting a caring and compassionate viewpoint towards them. It was pointed out that each of these themes demonstrated that collectively, the students were using linear models of communication and primarily situating empathy as a result of using either an expressive or conventional design logic.

The last half of the chapter explicated the six major themes that emerged in the analysis of the students' week 15 definitions of empathy. These themes were as follows: first, that empathy is a co-created activity where empathy partners jointly produce empathic shared meanings. Second, that empathy is not linear, but reciprocal in nature, with the power to transform both of the individuals involved in an empathy conversation. Third, that empathy involves open-ended listening where empathy partners engage in a

righteous struggle to understand one another rather than listen for precision or closure. Fourth, that empathy is not fixed or static, but a dynamic event that is always contextualized by the setting and the relationship between empathy partners. Fifth, that empathy is layered and complex, and can be composed and created in a variety of ways, thus giving it equifinality. And lastly, empathy is person-centered, and as such cannot be formulated as a one-size fits all phenomenon. Rather, it is co-created when empathy partners are able to explore their feelings and needs in a vulnerable, caring, and loving way. It also values the multifaceted identities of both empathy partners.

In each of these ways, the students demonstrated that by week 15 they had progressed in their thinking to embrace a more rhetorical design logic built from a transactional understanding of communication. In the following chapter, I will discuss the importance of these conclusions.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSIONS, CONTRIBUTIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS

The general purpose of the research conducted for this project was to gain a greater understanding of empathic communication within a specific context, that being an upper division communication course. The scope of the project centered on using experiential learning and journaling to gain access to the emotions, constraints, negotiations, and learning moments that students experienced throughout the semester. Specifically, I wanted to extend the work of previous researchers by addressing two research questions. The first was: What are the communicative behaviors and patterns that facilitate feelings of empathy in the lived experiences of a group of students? Prior research has focused almost exclusively on identifying empathy behaviors in the contexts of psychology or the medical field. This research also shows discrepancies in the role that verbal and nonverbal behaviors play in producing feelings of empathy. My first research question was designed to extend the conversation on these issues by looking at the way a group of students experienced empathy, from a communicative perspective, in their daily lives.

The second research question of this study was: In what way can empathy instruction, from a communication standpoint, shape students' understanding of empathic

processes? The intent of this question was to explore the way the students understanding of communication processes influenced their definitions and working models of empathy. Specifically, I was interested in tracking the way the students' understanding of empathy changed over the course of 15 weeks, after receiving empathy instruction and participating in experiential learning that centered on looking at empathy as a communicative accomplishment. In this chapter, I provide an overview of the entire project, delineate the specific ways that the results of the study extend the current research, reflect on the direction of future research, and then conclude the chapter by highlighting some of the limitations of the study. In order to fully understand and interpret the overarching findings of this study, it is important to look beyond the scope of the theoretical lens from which we started, thus it is here that I must discuss some other studies that were implicated in my findings.

<center>Revisiting the Communicative Dance of Empathy</center>

Research Question One

At the outset of the study I highlighted the primary themes that previous research has generated regarding the specific communicative behaviors and dynamics that are involved in an empathic exchange between two people. I pointed out that scholars have almost exclusively limited their research scope to studying empathic interactions within the contexts of psychology and medical sites. In no way did I try to minimalize the insights that this body of research has generated, as these studies have produced a useful knowledge base with which to understand various attributes of empathic communication. However, taken collectively, this line of research has created some discrepancies on the

role that communication plays in the production of empathy. For example, there has been

confusion on understanding the different roles that verbal and nonverbal communication

play in empathic communication (McHenry et al., 2012). Thus, looking at the current

research on the enactment of empathic communication, the literature review for this

project has shown that there are still some academic gaps for researchers such as myself,

to fill or, at the very least, to explore. Based on the limited contexts in which empathic

communication behaviors have been studied, and the discrepancies that still exist, one of

the primary purposes of this research project was to investigate how a group of students

experience empathic conversations in their daily lives.

Using the pedagogical approach of experiential learning, the first research

question (as stated above), asked students to reflect on a single communicative exchange

where they felt empathy and then to record that experience in an empathy journal.

Specifically, the students were asked to write about the communication behaviors and

dynamics that contributed to the feeling or perception of empathy that was generated by

the interaction. The journal entries were then analyzed using a constructivist's approach

to grounded theory, and applying the theoretical perspective of symbolic interactionism.

After a careful analysis of the students' experiences, two prominent themes surfaced in

the journals, each with subthemes that provided further insight into the research question.

To bring these themes to life, a dance metaphor was used. The first theme focused on the

sequence of the dance, or the communicative dynamics that facilitated the dance. The two

most important characteristics of this theme centered on turning points and turn-taking

(nexting). The second theme that surfaced in the journals focused on the dance steps, or

the specific communicative behaviors that produced the feelings of empathy in the

journal keepers. Within this framework, primary and secondary empathic codes were generated. The primary empathic codes that seemed to make the biggest difference for the students were: 1) verbal expressions of identification, 2) verbal expressions of difference, 3) haptics, 4) chronemics, and 5) kinesics. The secondary codes were: 1) proxemics, 2) vocalics, 3) verbal statements of spirituality, 4) verbal statements of advice, and 5) verbal statements of validation. Based on this review, the first portion of this chapter will highlight the way these findings provide exciting qualitative extensions to our collective understanding of the dance of empathic communication.

<u>Turning-Points and Nexting</u>

In the literature review, it was pointed out that previous research has looked at the sequential nature of empathic conversations and how they unfold. The studies that looked at this communicative dynamic did so using video recordings and transcripts of empathic conversations between patients and physicians (Suchman et al., 1997), and videotaped interactions between psychotherapists and clients (Wynn & Wynn, 2006). The main insights generated by these studies centered primarily on the importance of verbal communication in generating an empathic exchange. Specifically, the researchers found that patients rarely verbalized their emotional distress directly so physicians had to tune into their emotional cues, and then verbally invite the patients to elaborate on what they were feeling. The empathic sequences then rested on the ability of the physicians to verbally validate the emotions that the patients expressed (Suchman et al., 1997). Moreover, cognitive empathy in the form of perspective taking proved to be important to the empathic sequential process, as captured in the relationships between therapists and

clients. Wynn and Wynn (2006) identified an empathic exchange taking place when a therapist would correctly identify and verbally acknowledge what the client was feeling, based on perceived emotionally laden statements by clients. In addition, the researchers identified empathy between the interactants when a therapists used "we" or "us" language in sharing a similar experience that connected with what the client was experiencing. In each of these ways, verbal communication played an important role in the sequential turn-taking of empathic conversations.

However, this body of research also noted the role that nonverbal communication can play in facilitating an empathic interaction. This aspect highlighted the affective function of empathic communication (Bachelor, 1988), and was coded by the researchers in "sequences where the therapist demonstrates that he/she partakes in the patients' feelings" and the patient shows acceptance of the therapist's expressions (Wynn & Wynn, 2006, p. 1390). For example, when a therapist briefly touched the shoulder of a client during difficult or emotional moments during their conversation, this was interpreted as an empathic gesture by the therapist to partake in the client's feelings and comfort them.

While these studies point to the importance of sequential communication and turn-taking in generating empathy between a therapist and client or patient, there are at least two important gaps they leave unexplored. First, the insights they highlight were the result of either the researcher's interpretation of the data, or a group of therapists' perspectives on the interactions. Obtaining these informed viewpoints has merit; however, it leaves the findings one-sided. What is missing in this line of research is the perspective of the clients and patients, and whether they actually felt empathy based on

the verbal and nonverbal communication they received from the professionals from whom they were seeking help. My research fills this gap by accounting for the interpretation of the empathy receivers during an empathic interaction, and obtaining their perspective on the way sequential communication facilitated empathy. Furthermore, as stated earlier, my study broadens the scope of empathic communication by looking at empathic exchanges beyond the context of medical or psychological settings. Based on this, the following insights that emerged from the data for my study expand our collective understanding of the importance of turn-taking in empathic communication.

Of the studies that have looked at the sequential nature of empathic communication just listed, only Suchman et al. (1997) has tried to understand how the turn-taking process initiates empathic interactions, rather than capturing specific sequences within a larger conversation. The key discernment identified by Suchman and his colleagues is that empathic conversations between physicians and patients hinged on the physicians ability to capitalize on empathic opportunities with verbal invitations for elaboration and then validation. My study extended this knowledge in three specific ways. First, collectively the journal keepers showed that the initiation of empathy interactions outside of the contexts of a doctor's office or a psychologists couch do not just hinge on the verbal feedback of empathy providers. As was explicated in Chapter 4, a large portion of the students crafted narratives that demonstrated the significance of nonverbal communication in the turn-taking process, particularly as a catalyst that launched the empathy interactions described in the journal entries. The turn toward vulnerable communication that the students experienced often came through nonverbal modalities, crying, or outward displays of emotion that didn't require words. Second, and

just as important, the "nexting" actions of the empathy givers, as written about by the journal keepers, could also be enacted through nonverbal communication. Actions such as leaning in, getting on the ground with the distressed person, and using facial expressions that showed empathy worked to begin the empathy interaction that followed.

The third insight produced by my research, when looking at the importance of turn-taking in empathic communication, is the significance of looking at the process holistically. Indeed, while it is insightful to notice the individual dance steps that create an empathy dance, it must not be forgotten that the dance itself is the result of the jointly produced behaviors of each dancer. The co-created nature of empathy rests on the agency of both dancers, each playing off of the steps of the other, and attributing meaning to the maneuvers of the other, or as Blumer (1969) stated, "a fitting of the developing action of each into that of the other to form a joint or overbridging action" (p. 109). Thus, consistent with the theoretical position of symbolic interactionism, it is problematic to simply focus on what one empathy partner is doing without seeking to discover what the meaning of behaviors has for the other partner. This idea will be further illuminated in the discussion of the findings for Chapter 5. However, for now, it is this key aspect that takes me to the second grouping of findings that emerged in Chapter 4, that is, the use of specific empathy codes and the meanings that the journal keepers attributed to them.

Empathy Codes

Following the delineation of the way turn-taking and nexting work to initiate an empathic exchange, the second part of research question one identified the specific communicative behaviors that the students recognized as essential to their feelings and

perceptions of empathy. Based on this, primary and secondary empathy codes were highlighted, pointing to a constellation of verbal and nonverbal behaviors (these specific behaviors were identified at the beginning of this chapter and in Chapter 4). Many of the codes that emerged in the data have been shown to be important in previous studies on empathy, as was noted in the literature review. However, looking at that collection of studies and the findings for my study reveals some interesting ways that the students' journal entries moved our collective understanding of empathy beyond the research that has been previously conducted. The first of these has to do with verbal communication.

Verbal Communication

Historically, the focus on empathic communication centered on verbal communicative statements. The literature review demonstrated that this mode of theorizing largely grew out of the field of psychology, in particular, the Rogerian approach to therapy which encouraged therapists to respond to clients with empathic statements that would foster "unconditional positive regard" (Rogers, 1957). Building on that type of theorizing, other scholars conducted studies, primarily in psychology and health care, to identify the many different types of verbal responses that a professional in those settings could provide in order to show empathy for their clients or patients. Collectively, this group of research has generated a taxonomy of verbal expressions that have predominantly made their way into training programs and manuals designed to teach practitioners to become more empathic in their communication. In many ways, the insights generated from my study, based on the journal keepers lived experiences of empathy, echo some of the verbal responses codified in the existing research on empathic

communication. In particular, statements that showed validation or acknowledgements of shared feelings proved to be in accordance with what other studies have found (Anspach, 1998; Lynch et al., 2006; Wittenberg-Lyle et al., 2012).

However, looking more closely at the way the journal keepers valued these types of verbal communication highlights the way they advance the academic discussion on empathy. Explicitly, the journal keepers provided support for the claim made by Eunha and Changdai (2013), that perhaps validation carries more empathic weight than verbal expressions of reflection, which has largely been the focal point of the Rogerian approach to empathic, client-centered therapy. Although validation was a secondary code that emerged in the journal entries, the fact that it did surface and that statements of reflection did not, provides support for those who claim validation should be central to the teaching and training of those attempting to create an empathic relationships with another (Clark, 2010). Furthermore, the journal keepers supported the notion that verbal statements that express an empathy giver's ability to identify with the feelings or situations of another can produce feelings of empathy in individuals outside of medical or psychological settings (Wittenberg-Lyle et al., 2012). While this is not surprising, it was interesting to consider that some of the journal keepers rejected this type of verbal empathy, and instead, valued expressions that spoke to the uniqueness of their experience. This group of students showed that it was more empathic for them to hear someone express that they can't identify with their feelings and situation, but they would love to *try to understand them,* if the person would open up and talk about them. There are other scholars who support this type of verbal empathy. One example would be the way Brown (2007) conceptualizes providing empathy as a way to alleviate feelings of shame. My study

echoes her findings and those that align with hers. In addition, my study provides an invitation for researchers interested in teaching empathy or those interested in training others to communicate empathically, to reconsider the stance that empathizers should verbally state that they can identify with what the distressed individual is going through in order to generate an empathic connection. While such a stance may be the empathy code that a person needs to hear to feel empathy, taking the opposite position can be just as empathic and should not be undervalued in the types of verbal statements that can produce feelings of empathy. Unfortunately, the data for the study did not provide any clues about how to decipher which type of verbal stance to take. Perhaps future research can take up this topic.

Beyond the way validation and statements of identification or difference worked in the empathic experiences of the journal keepers, two distinct types of empathic verbal communication emerged from the journal entries; these were verbal statements of spirituality and advice. In conducting my literature review on verbal communication and empathy, it became evident that there was little to no research connecting these two types of verbal statements to empathic communication. I was unable to find any research studies that supported the notion that offering advice can actually be a form of empathic communication. Moreover, there is a very limited amount of research on verbal expressions of spirituality and empathy, the exception being a small group of scholars in the medical field advocating for healthcare professionals to use spiritual empathy when dealing with patients (Chism & Magnan, 2009; Herbert, Sherrington, Maher, & Moseley, 2001; Sulmasy, 1997). These scholars describe the concept of "spiritual empathy" as "verbally expressing one's understanding of a patient's spiritual concerns – is itself a

form of spiritual care and an essential feature of nurse-patient interactions that facilitate the patient's movement toward experiences of spiritual well-being" (Chism & Magnan, 2009, p. 579). This description of spiritual empathy was congruent with the way a group of students in my study connected spiritual statements with empathy, as was pointed out in the findings chapter for research question one. Consequently, when looking holistically at the way verbal statements of spirituality and advice functioned in the students' narratives, an interesting connection can be made to the academic narrative on emotional communication.

In her book, *Communicating Emotion*, Sally Planalp (1999), one of the foremost scholars on emotional communication, points out that when one person turns to another with the intention of speaking about the strong emotions they are feeling, and the experiences that gave rise to those emotions, it tends to play out in one of two ways. It will either be a positive or negative experience for the "empathy seeker," leading to feelings of connection and empathy or feelings of frustration and misunderstanding. Planalp magnifies this idea by noting that this difference often stems from a misunderstanding of two concepts, *venting* and *catharsis*. She argues that our culture tends to view venting as a good thing, the cathartic experience of aggressively releasing all of one's intense emotions, usually in the presence of a listening ear, as a way to move past them or get over them. However, drawing on a body of research from a variety of fields, Planalp goes on to argue that:

> Unbridled venting of emotion produces temporary relief at best and long-term harm at worst, especially if it is handled poorly. Rather than providing a healthy outlet for emotion, uncontrolled expression often provides an opportunity to practice and become expert at negative feelings and action. (Planalp, 1999, p. 107)

After decades of examining the way families and couples communicate in emotionally charged moments, Gottman (2002) found that parents or partners who attempted to be supportive by letting the other excessively vent to them often only exacerbated the negative emotions of the ventee. Thus, one of the intellectual extensions that my research invites the academic community to consider is the way that empathic communication can move individuals away from traditional conceptualizations of venting conversations and toward cathartic conversations. To appreciate this insight, it is necessary to explain what constitutes a cathartic conversation.

After showing how venting is often seen as "cathartic" and actually has a negative effect on emotive communication, Planalp (1999) reveals that true catharsis should not be conflated with emotional ventilation, as it is a completely separate concept. The origin of the word "katharsis" is Greek, meaning a "medical purgation," which then came to be construed as the uninhibited venting of emotions. However, drawing on the work of Nussbaum (1986), Planalp posits:

> The primary, ongoing, and central meaning of "catharsis" is roughly one of clearing up or clarification and that they can give us access to a truer and deeper level of ourselves. The function of catharsis, then, is not to purge ourselves of harmful feelings, but rather to understand ourselves and others through the feelings. (Planalp, 1999, p. 108)

When framed in this light, the timbre of the empathic conversations described by journal keepers could be characterized as cathartic conversations. The communicative process and the results of this process, as revealed in the journals, construct a picture of empathy as being a way for individuals to find a type of clarification, understanding, and connection that transforms dark emotions into largely light ones. Drawing on the symbolic statements that journal keepers interpreted as empathic, the cathartic nature of

empathic communication becomes much clearer. This is particularly true when looking at how the verbal statements of advice and spirituality functioned in the feelings of empathy described by some of the students. In these conversations, the empathy givers did not just allow the distressed empathy receivers to ruminate and "vent" all of their dark emotions in a way that actually exacerbated the darkness of the emotions. Rather, some of the empathy givers chose to use their agency to try and persuade the empathy receivers toward finding a deeper level of understanding, even in the midst of the dark emotions they were experiencing, by uttering statements of advice or spirituality. These statements helped frame the distressing experience that empathy receivers were going through and thus provided a cathartic clarification and understanding to the events. As Sulmasy (1997) stated, empathic verbal statements of spirituality help individuals find "a purpose in life, and the ability to find meaning" in what one is experiencing. Similarly, verbal expressions of advice gave empathy receivers the opportunity to find a cathartic way to view their situation by providing a meaningful direction on how to move forward in their actions or thoughts. In each of these ways, the journal keepers in my study are inviting the academic community to recognize the power of these types of verbal statements and to consider that there are multiple ways empathic communication can work to influence the emotional state and cognitive perspective of distressed individuals.

Nonverbal Communication

Not only did the students' journal entries provide greater insight into the nature of verbal communication and empathy, but they also extended our current understanding of the way nonverbal gestures influence empathic communication. Perhaps the strongest

extension of the students' lived experiences, as it relates to this form of communication, came in their depictions of chronemics.

      <u>Chronemics.</u> One of the most noteworthy results of my study had to do with the way chronemics played an important role in the production of empathy for many journal keepers. The connection between empathy and chronemics is virtually nonexistent in the research on empathy, thus it was not discussed in the literature review. In fact, after searching multiple data bases in a variety of fields, I was only able to locate one study that connected the two concepts in a substantive way. This study was conducted by Ledbetter in 2008 and looked at the way reply rate functions as an immediacy cue in emails. The study found that the perceived emotional empathy of a message and the participant's sex played as an important of a role in the perception of immediacy as did the reply rate. Beyond this study, the topic of chronemics appears to be absent from the literature on empathy. This makes sense when it is understood that empathy has predominantly been studied in the limited contexts of medicine and psychotherapy, where timing issues are mostly fixed and scheduled by appointment. As a result of this, the finding of my study, as it relates to chronemics, makes an important contribution to our collective understanding of empathy. Those specific contributions are as follows.

      In raising our awareness of the communicative function of time, the journal keepers highlighted four specific ways that chronemics proved important to the production of empathic communication. First, some of the journal entries pointed out that the distresses that often create the need for receiving empathic communication don't always necessitate a one-time grandiose empathic exchange that leaves the distressed individual feeling better. Rather, for some individuals, the perpetual nature of the distress

is such that a long-term empathic commitment is needed in order to provide the type of empathic communication that soothes or comforts. This communicative use of chronemics points to the value of cultivating empathic relationships that can provide an anchor as the distressful waves of life keep coming. Conversely, the second chronemic insight generated by the journal keepers demonstrated that when an individual drops what they are doing to have an empathic conversations, the very act of allowing for the disruption in their routine, is a communicative act of empathy. Thus, when journal keeper A-5 wrote about calling her sister at midnight to talk about her break-up, the agency of the sister to take the time to listen to her heartbroken sibling was, in and of itself, an empathic communicative act.

These two insights highlight the importance of recognizing that empathic communication can take many forms and this requires a sensitivity to the context surrounding an individual's distress. Scholars have noted that the U.S. tends to operate on a monochromic time system, where time is segmented and valued in precise, small units (Guerrero, DeVito & Hecht, 1999; Hall & Hall, 1990). As a result of this, individuals in the U.S. often place significance on schedules, routines, and deadlines. Hence, it can be hard for many people to allow for disruptions to their routines. However, the journal keepers invite people to recognize that empathic communication does not necessarily have to come as a disruption to daily routines. Indeed, when an individual is intimately involved in another's life and has a deeper understanding and knowledge of the types of challenges that the other is facing, they can actually schedule time for empathic communication to transpire, as was highlighted by the journal keeper who wrote about her mother waiting for her (i.e., the daughter) to come home from school and talk about

her day (A-16). On the flip side, many journal entries highlighted that a strong factor contributing to empathic communication is one's ability to allow for disruptions in the daily routines of life. This pushes those who embrace a monochromic perspective of time to recognize that they must value the empathic opportunities when they present themselves, which can and often will create ruptures in one's daily routines.

In addition to these two insights, the journal keepers pointed to two other ways that chronemics can influence empathic communication. These focus on the way timing works in the emotional lives of people. As was pointed out in Chapter 4, collectively the students' written experiences of empathy revealed empathic interactions cannot be forced. The journal entries showed that for some people, it is timing that perhaps plays the biggest role in facilitating empathic interactions, even more so than the relationship between empathy interactants. In these cases, the shift toward vulnerability takes time and when the time is right, then the distressed individual will open up to the person they are with *at that time*, thus providing that person with the opportunity to "next" with empathy and begin the empathic exchange, as was the case of the employee talking to their boss (B-1). Understanding this important aspect of empathic communication invites others to be sensitive to the emotional timing of another person's life experiences. This type of sensitivity underscores the final chronemics insight that emerged from the journal entries, namely, investing in the relationship and staying ready for the timing to unfold. This observation manifested itself in the journal entries that demonstrated that when certain students were experiencing distress, it was the investment of time that a friend or family member made in their life that provided the relational immediacy that helped the journal keeper feel that they could shift to vulnerable communication and initiate an

empathic interaction. In these instances, chronemics was evidenced by the relational investment that the empathy givers made, to stay close to the distressed person, and to stay ready to talk to them, *when the timing was right*. Chapter 4 highlighted this by providing the example of the father that could tell his son was hurting and kept inviting the son to join him for activities until he was ready to talk (A-3).

Looking at the final two chronemic insights that emerged from the data invites researchers, practitioners, and individuals to appreciate that empathic communication cannot be forced or controlled by empathy givers. However, this doesn't mean that empathy givers cannot *influence* the empathic process by investing more fully in their relationship with the distressed individual. The journal entries showed that this type of investment can facilitate empathic interactions in at least two ways. First, it allows the potential empathy giver the opportunity to be close to the distressed individual when they are ready to talk. Second, by engaging more fully in the relationship, empathy givers can create emotional immediacy, which can then make it more likely that the distressed individual will shift to vulnerable communication because they feel secure in doing so, or perhaps because they perceive that the empathy giver really cares for them. The journal keepers' experiences opened a window for either of these possibilities, and in doing so, underscored the importance of chronemics in empathic communication. However, writing about chronemics was not the only way that the journal keepers moved our theorizing about empathic communication forward. This also happened in the way they wrote about some of the other nonverbal empathic codes.

Haptics. While there have been many studies conducted on touch in a variety of fields and contexts, there is a limited number of studies that have looked specifically at

touch in relation to empathic communication. Perhaps this is why various fields are advocating for more research and scholarship in this area. After interviewing a group of social workers, Lynch and Garrett (2010) noted, "while touch occurs in practice situations between social workers and children, it is not a subject that is openly discussed or specifically formalized in any of the social work agencies represented by the respondents" (p. 395). They went on to say that, "the majority of social work practitioners interviewed expressed a desire to have more discussion on touch" (Lynch & Garrett, 2010, p. 395). Similarly, after conducting a literature review of haptics in the medical field, Rousseau and Blackburn (2008) commented, "It seems the act of touching…has engendered little interest in modern medical literature… touch has seemed to disappear as an adjunct in the armamentarium of physician–patient interaction" (p. 1299). A similar need for more research in this area has been echoed by those in the field of psychology (Dehning et al., 2014). Zur (2007) has posited that one of the reasons for a lack of research in this area is that in professional fields, sensitivity to touching behaviors has grown to the point where it tops the "do not do" list for many employers. Even 22 years ago, employers were advancing policies that stated, "a handshake is about the limit of social physical contact at this time" (Gutheil & Gabbard, 1993, p. 195).

Despite the push to limit or remove touching between teachers and students, social workers, psychologists and medical professionals and clients or patients, there have been those who have recognized that touch is a powerful form of communication and thus should be seen as something to be embraced in appropriate ways in appropriate settings. Specifically, Rousseau and Blackburn (2008) invited the medical community to reconsider the importance of empathic touch:

> There is nothing more treasured than the physician–patient relationship and the personal intimacy a person offers to a physician. This is the essence of medicine—the basis for healing—and in the end, is the quintessence of one human being caring for another. As such, it is imperative that we fix what is wrong, and bring touch back into medicine, for in the end, we will all be patients, and we will all need, and want, to be touched. (p. 1300)

The empathic yearning for connection and compassion can be felt in Rousseau's words. However, it does not move us any closer to understanding when and how touch can be appropriate. My research has broadened this conversation. In looking at how haptics worked in the personal lives of the journal keepers, three interesting findings surfaced that warrant consideration and that invite individuals and professionals to strongly consider when approaching the subject of touch. First, and perhaps above all, the journal keepers highlighted the importance of being sensitive to a person's touch ethic (Benjamin & Sohnen-Moe, 2005). This insight alone should cause all those using touch to approach it with caution, even when the intent is to communicate empathy. Because a person's touch ethic is a behavior norm they have cultivated over their life, it makes sense that people would rarely explicitly discuss it. None of the journal keepers expressed that they vocalized their touch ethic or their need to be touched or not to be touched. However, what the students did reveal is that empathic haptics is strongly influenced by the relational groundwork that has been laid down between two people.

Thus the second insight generated by the journal keepers centers around the importance of relationships and the exclusive form of communication touch can be in relationships. As was highlighted in Chapter 4, all of those who wrote about touch as a part of their empathic interaction identified their empathy partners as a romantic partner, friend, or trusted neighbor. Which is to say, none of the journals that identified touch as meaningful, spoke of relationships that involved counselors, co-workers, teachers, or

spiritual leaders. In light of this, while Rousseau and Blackburn (2008) advocate for allowing for empathic touches in professional interactions to connect with those who are suffering, the journal keepers demonstrated that perhaps this exclusive form of communication should be limited to the personal relationships that one has cultivated outside of these professional contexts (McNeil-Haber, 2004).

The final noteworthy finding that emerged in relation to haptics and empathy centered on sex differences. Of those who mentioned touch as important to their empathic experience, only one of them was male. It was pointed out in Chapter 4 that this is not particularly surprising because research on gendered communication has shown that men, in Western culture, are socialized to engage in less affectionate forms of touch when compared to the way females are socialized (Wood & Inman, 1993). Despite this, my literature review produced only three studies that have looked at sex differences as they relate to empathic touch. The first of these asked 248 college students to watch videotapes or simulated counseling interviews and rate the empathic touch between the counselors and the clients (Driscoll, Newman, & Seals, 1988). The study revealed that female counselors were perceived as more empathic when they used touch, as opposed to the male counselors. More recently, a team of researchers compared empathic touching between male psychiatrists and male surgeons (Dehning et al., 2014). The study had 56 surgeons and 50 psychiatrists fill out empathy questionnaires and revealed that when it comes to embracing an empathic touch, that male psychiatrists scored significantly higher in their perceptions of than did the surgeons. Lastly, Gleeson and Higgins (2009) interviewed 10 registered psychiatric nurses about their perceptions of empathic touch. Among other findings, the interviews showed that male nurses were cautious about

empathically touching female clients because of a fear that it would be misinterpreted as a sexual advance. In order to guard against this, they acknowledged that they used minimal touching or limited it to public spaces, where others could view the interaction.

It is clear to see that these studies merely scratch the surface of looking at empathic touching and sex differences. Perhaps this is why Hertenstein and Keltner (2011) have advocated for more research on sex difference and haptics in general. While my study is a step in this direction, I also echo the need for more research in this area, particularly as it relates to empathic communication. While my study was not designed to elicit generalizable "truths," the findings do invite us, as a society, to further engage in a dialogue about how men may be gendered to be hesitant to embrace the empathic code of haptics. This is sad as it could limit their access to this powerful form of empathic communication. Furthermore, when looking at the data concerning empathic touching in totality, it cannot be ignored that it has been limited to the contexts of medicine and psychiatry (Helme, 2002). Based on this, my research advocates, at the very least, to move the conversation in a direction that pushes our thinking and theorizing outside of these contexts by inviting us to raise our awareness of how this empathic code gets enacted in the daily lives of individuals. The same holds true for the final primary nonverbal empathy code that emerged, kinesics.

In several ways, the primary findings that surfaced in relation to kinesics echo the findings of previous research. For example, in the analysis chapter for research question one, it was pointed out that three types of kinetic gestures surfaced as being important to the empathic communicative experiences of the journal keepers; these were eye contact, facial expressions, and body movement. The primary theoretical themes that underscored

these types of gestures focused on the perception of listening and the perception of emotional contagion. When empathy partners made eye contact and positioned their bodies in open positions, the empathy receivers attributed these behaviors as signs of attentive, empathic listening. This interpretation supports the work of previous research (Floyd, 2014; Jones & Guerrero, 2001; Roberts & Strayer, 1996). Furthermore, when an empathy partner mirrored either the body or facial expressions of the distressed journal keeper, this gave the perception that the empathy giver was experiencing the emotional state of the empathy receiver. This finding is also supported by previous research on mirroring behaviors and empathy (Baniss & Ward, 2007). Thus, the students' interpretation of these kinetic gestures provides further support for studies on empathic listening behaviors and communicative displays of mirroring behaviors. However, the students' journal entries also provided an interesting and unique insight about the way kinesics can communicate empathy through the *perception* of emotional contagion.

Researchers have long identified empathy as having cognitive and emotive elements. These are internal processes that have largely been studied from a psychological or neurological standpoint. However, the students' journal entries invite us to consider the way emotions have a strongly communicative component that influences cognitive perceptions of empathy. In Chapter 4 it was pointed out that there was a group of students who felt empathy when they perceived the other person was "feeling what they were feeling." This critical perception was attached to outward displays of behavior, particularly the mirroring behaviors of the students' empathy partners as communicated through the modality of kinesics. Reviewing the definition of emotional contagion is instructive here. Emotional contagion takes place "when you 'catch' the emotions of

others from their expressions (as you might catch a cold)" (Planalp, 1999, p.62). Thus, theorizing about this concept has focused on the transference of identical emotions from one person to the next, via communication. However, the journal keepers' empathic experiences extend our understanding of this concept to appreciate the empathic implications that can manifest when one person *perceives* that emotional contagion has taken place, based on their interpretation of nonverbal gestures. Thus, when some of the students' empathy partners mirrored their emotional displays of behavior, through facial expressions or body gestures, the distressed journal keepers felt like these outward displays demonstrated that the empathy giver was actually feeling the same emotions. This observation should facilitate discussions about the importance of mirroring behaviors and our understanding of the importance of emotional contagion.

Proxemics and vocalics. There is a very limited amount of research on the way proxemics and vocalics can facilitate feelings of empathy. Perhaps this helps explain why they emerged as a secondary code in the data for this study. However, because of this, the observations that did emerge from the students journal entries can serve as a conversation starter for more rigorous research in these areas.

To date, only one study has explicitly tied empathic communication to the nonverbal channel of proxemics. In this study, Graves and Robinson (1976) had 80 students evaluate a psychology counselor "in training" based on their verbal and nonverbal communication. The study was designed so that the students would role play with a counselor about a problem for 25 minutes. The students were randomly assigned to one of four counseling session groups, where the counselors would change either their nonverbal or verbal behaviors toward the client. They would either use positive

nonverbal behaviors, identified by more eye contact, trunk leaning, open body and leg positioning, or they would use negative nonverbal behaviors, identified by the opposite of all of those behaviors. The counselors also changed their verbal orientation toward the clients by using positive messages that were meant to show empathy and caring, or messages that showed a lack of understanding or compassion. Each of the students was randomly assigned to a counseling session where the verbal and nonverbal behaviors were either congruent or created a double-bind of incongruence. The results showed that when a counselor used incongruent messages, the students were more likely to create proxemics distance between the two during their interaction. Not surprisingly, the researchers found that when a client viewed their counselor as empathic they would assess their counselor as more genuine and become more psychologically and physically close to their counselors.

This study is almost 40 years old now and during my extensive literature review I was unable to identify any other study that has specifically connected proxemics to empathy. Based on this, the insights that the students produced in my study offer a fresh look at this type of nonverbal communication as it relates to empathy. To review, these insights are as follows.

In the data on haptics, it was pointed out that everyone has a touch ethic that filters what they believe is appropriate types of touching. In the journal entries that identified proxemics as important to the construction of empathy, it became noticeable that people also have a proxemics ethic that guides their comfort of closeness. This is supported by other studies on proxemics (Moore, 2010; Olson & Olson, 2000). Not surprisingly, the journal keepers reported that the relationship and setting are paramount

to a person's proxemics preferences. Empathy receivers who wrote about being physically close to their empathy partner identified the relationships as personal and intimate in nature, i.e., family, close friends, partners. Thus, similar to haptics, this empathy code has an exclusivity to it that seems to be largely contingent on the intimacy level of the two people engaged in the empathy dance. This is not surprising. However, the journal keepers also showed that this empathy code supports one of the primary relational dialectics identified by Baxter and Montgomery (1996), which is the need people have for space and closeness. As a result of this dynamic, some of the students expressed wanting space before they were ready to accept closeness as an empathy code. This underscores the patience and understanding that is often required from empathy givers, as they wait for the dialectic to swing back, causing the distressed empathy receiver to desire closeness. As a result of this, in a very strange way, simply allowing someone to take space can be a type of empathic communication because it shows a sensitivity to what the other is feeling and a respect for what they are experiencing. Conversely, when the desire for empathic closeness surfaced in the journal keepers, the very act of traveling to be *with* them, by the empathy giver can communicate empathy. It also facilitated the empathic dance to unfold, thus serving as a catalyst for other empathy codes to follow. Each of these observations extends our collective understanding on how proxemics can communicate empathy and can serve as a jumping off place for future research.

The literature surrounding vocalics or paralanguage and empathy is as nonexistent as that surrounding proxemics. Again, my review of the literature turned up only two studies that have looked primarily at empathy and vocalics. The first of these studies was

conducted by Gaushell (1982) and consisted of 36 psychology students analyzing the

vocal qualities of recorded counseling sessions. The verbal portion of the sessions was

scrambled using "an electronic filter that removed the high frequency portions of the

recorded segments… [but] left the paralanguage channels intact," specifically the vocal

pitch, tempo, and loudness of the voices (p. 522). After quantitatively rating each voice

for empathic qualities, the researchers found that there was no significant or systematic

relationship between the helper's paralanguage and the perception of empathic

communication. The second study that looked at vocalics and empathy was conducted

more recently and was highlighted in the literature review. In this study McHenry et al.

(2012) analyzed audio recordings of oncology healthcare providers talking with cancer

patients. They did this by playing segments of the recordings to a group of listeners (i.e.,

27 graduate students in a voice disorders class). They had each of the students classify

how they interpreted the empathic qualities of the voices on the recordings. The results of

the study showed that all but one of the healthcare providers reduced their speaking rate

and that a majority of them reduced their pitch when they had to give a patient bad news.

As a result of their analysis, the listeners collectively interpreted that when a healthcare

provider actually lowered their pitch and reduced their speaking rate, they were perceived

as more caring and empathic in their tone.

Aside from these two studies, researchers have not accounted for the vocal

qualities of empathic communication. Thus the findings of my study fill an important

need to consider the way this type of communication can work to produce feelings of

empathy in empathy receivers. A detailed description of those findings are accounted for

in Chapter 4 and the following provides a brief synopsis of how the students saw

paralanguage as a form of empathic communication.

Two of the journal keepers wrote about empathic conversations that took place over the phone. As a result of this, they were limited in the channels of communication they had available to them during their interaction. This dynamic raised their awareness to duality of meanings being produced via the content of what was being said and the way it was being expressed through vocalics (Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1969). Based on the words of these two journal keepers, three attributes of paralanguage surfaced that seemed to contribute to their feelings of empathy during their conversations. First, when the empathy partner spoke with "positive tone" it made the distressed listener feel that she was getting empathy (A-5). However, to approach all empathy conversations in this way would be problematic based on the account of the second journal keeper who spoke on the phone. She noted that she felt empathy when her friend matched her vocal and emotional expression, thus, if she was mad, she felt empathy when her friend also got mad and let her know that through her voice. Thus, the second observation about vocalics as an empathy code would be that some empathy receivers feel greater empathy when their empathy partner does not just keep a positive tone throughout the conversation, but in fact, matches their vocal qualities to reflect the emotional tone of the empathy receiver. Finally, the third finding that surfaced, in relation to paralanguage and empathy was the importance of pausing during empathy conversations. Journal keeper B-4 expressed that when her friend would pause and let her cry and express herself, she felt like her friend was acting empathically toward her. This observation connects with the literature on active listening, which has noted that pausing can be an effective way to facilitate the feeling of being understood (Margutti, 2006; Stone, Patton, & Heen, 1999).

Final Thoughts About Research Question One

While demonstrating that the students' lived experiences with empathy supports previous research on empathic behaviors is an important insight in and of itself, by that I mean it lends greater support to the specific modalities of communication that previous researchers have identified, the journal entries also highlighted some of the important nuances of this type of communication, nuances that are often omitted or overlooked in the research. Thus, before moving to my discussion of research question two, it is essential for me to point out two of the primary overarching themes that can be found in the students' responses to research question one. Looking holistically at the various empathy codes that emerged from the students' empathy conversations, two predominant issues stand out that must not be ignored. The first is the primacy that relationships play in the construction of an empathy dance. Because the vast majority of the research on empathic communication has been conducted in professional settings, the relationships that have been studied have been limited to doctor-patient or counselor-client. Because of this, what we know about the way empathy gets produced through interaction is significantly limited and doesn't account for other relationships, outside of professional settings. My research has taken a step in that direction, as it allowed for the students to use any of their relationships to deconstruct for empathic meaning. In doing this, the data highlights many nuances to empathic communication that are simply not found in the current literature on empathy. Looking at the variety of these observations demonstrates how idiosyncratic the construction of empathy is when two people interact. It also highlights the need to continue to study empathy in all types of relationships and contexts in order to garner a clearer perspective on how it can be produced.

The second interesting finding that engages previous academic conversations about empathy is the primacy of nonverbal communication that appeared in the journal entries. In the literature review, it was pointed out that because most of the scholarship on empathy has been conducted in professional settings, there have been discrepancies in whether verbal or nonverbal empathic communication provides the greatest means of showing empathy for clients or patients (Ellingson & Buzzanell, 1999; Frank, 2004; McHenry et al., 2012; Suchman et al., 1997). Consequently, when looking at the lived experiences of the journal keepers, almost all of whom described conversations that were not conducted in professional settings, it was interesting to note the primacy of nonverbal communication in relation to the empathic codes that surfaced. After reading and analyzing their journal entries, it became clear, as was pointed out in Chapter 4, that it was the nonverbal behaviors of their empathy partners that seemed to stand out the most. This does not diminish the verbal statements they described, but it does invite those who are teaching and training others to give empathy to consider the way they talk about the nonverbal gestures of empathy. Perhaps there needs to be more emphasis placed on realizing that when empathy opportunities arise, it may not be as important to try and say the right thing as it is to simply let them know with our presence and our body that we are *with* them in their pain, anger, sadness, or whatever cluster of emotions they are feeling. This takes me to my final thought, as I look globally at the findings that emerged from research question one.

If there is one thing that kept coming back to me again and again as I read the literature on empathic communication and compared it to the insights that surfaced in the lives of the journal keepers, it was that it is problematic to prescribe any concrete formula

for how empathic communication "should" look. Relationships and context will always play a role when two people attempt to connect through communication and this is especially true for moments of empathic interaction because of the strong emotions and timing issues that are almost always at play. Therefore, while some empathy codes or a cluster of codes would work for one person in one setting, those same codes may not work at another time, or with a different person in a different setting. This observation invites all of those that research and teach about how to "do" empathy to qualify their empathic formulas with a sensitivity to alternative codes or communicative types of empathic expression. For example, in reading countless articles and books on empathic communication, nowhere did I find an author who advocated for screaming angrily with a distressed person as a form of giving empathy. There may be an author out there who addresses this, but I couldn't find them. Yet, as was explained earlier, my research showed that in some relationships, this act can be interpreted as an empathic gesture of vocalics, one that displays a willingness to embrace the emotions of a distressed person. Therefore, while my research identified patterns that emerged from the data that created specific empathy codes, when I teach or discuss what I learned, I will always qualify my remarks by pointing out that these patterns may or may not work depending on the context and relationship. I believe more authors and researchers should do the same in their writing and theorizing about empathic communication. Furthermore, my research demonstrates that there is a great need for more qualitative studies on empathic communication in all types of relationships to help us collectively better understand some of the nuances that surfaced in the small pool of experiences used to generate the data for my study. This is truly an exciting frontier, with much left to explore.

Redefining Empathic Communication

<u>Research Question Two</u>

In the literature review, I highlighted the way the academic community has struggled to define empathy over the decades. It was pointed out that the vast majority of scholars have viewed empathy as comprising two primary components. The first of these is cognitive empathy, which involves an empathy giver through some form of perspective taking to understand the situation of another person. The second component is affective empathy, or the ability of an empathy giver to spontaneously identify with the emotional state of another individual. What is lacking from these conceptualizations of empathy is a greater understanding of the way it is produced and co-created through communicative processes. To this end, the literature review also noted that those who have looked at empathy as a communicative phenomenon have largely done so through linear models that show a lack of appreciation for the transactional nature of interpersonal communication. Sadly, the communication field has failed to make an effort to fix this omission in the empathic research, with the exception of a handful of scholars (Bennett, 1981; Broome, 1991; DeTurk, 2001; Stewart, 1983). These scholars each have extended the invitation for developing more complex theorizing about empathic communication, theorizing that moves away from linear thinking and that captures the way empathy is jointly produced *between* people.

The second research question of this project was meant to heed the call of these scholars by gaining a greater appreciation for how a group of students developed more sophisticated notions of empathic communication over the course of a semester. Using a constructivist approach to grounded theory, and adopting the theoretical frameworks of

symbolic interactionism and message design logic, the students' definitions of empathy from week 1 and week 15 were analyzed for communication underpinnings. Their definitions revealed a more complex understanding of empathic communication than is presently used in the majority of the literature on empathy, as noted above. Thus, this section will highlight the way the students' week 15 understanding of empathic communication provides an invitation for the rest of the academic community to develop greater complexity in their conceptualization of the communicative process involved in the construction of empathy.

In the 1st week of the semester, the students' understandings of empathy centered around three themes. First, collectively the students felt that empathy was something that one person sent toward another person, thus demonstrating an empathy-giver orientation. Second, the students supported the notion that empathy was something that needed to be "done correctly" through "returning the right response" to an empathy receiver. This meant an empathy giver needed to find the "right" emotion the other was feeling and then communicate to the other that they correctly identified the emotion, thus hitting the empathic bull's eye. Lastly, many of the students situated empathy as a psychological phenomenon where empathy givers needed to engage in the mental exercise of perspective taking in order to "put themselves in the shoes of the other" and understand their situation. They also conflated sympathy and empathy, or at least blurred the boundaries between the two, by using the word sympathy as being synonymous with empathy, and by identifying empathy as the ability to "feel *for* someone." In each of these ways, the students revealed that they conceptualized empathy as a linear process, one that would operate from a transmission or interactional communication model.

Ironically, the literature review showed that many of the empathy theorists have adopted similar linear models that positioned empathy as predominantly a psychological, biological, or neurological activity (de Waal, 2009; Nowak, 2011; Zahn-Waxler, Robinson, & Emde, 1992).

Consequently, after a semester of keeping empathy journals, reading a variety of authors theorizing about empathy, and engaging in in-class and out-of-class activities and discussions, the students demonstrated a level of empathic learning that stretched their earlier understanding of empathy in a variety of ways by week 15. Moreover, the themes from their week 15 definitions invite the academic community to reframe empathy as a communicative phenomenon, not just a cognitive or affective one. Therefore, the following are the specific themes that surfaced in their week 15 definitions.

First, collectively the students articulated that empathy is a co-created activity where empathy partners jointly produce empathic shared meanings. Second, that communicative empathy is not linear but reciprocal in nature, with the power to transform both of the individuals involved in an empathy conversation. Third, that empathic communication involves open-ended listening where empathy partners engage in an honest struggle to understand one another rather than listen for precision or closure. Fourth, that empathy interaction is not fixed or static, but a dynamic event that is always contextualized by the setting and the relationship between empathy partners. Fifth, that empathy is layered and complex, and can be composed and created in a variety of ways, thus giving it equifinality. And lastly, that communicative empathy is person-centered, and as such cannot be formulated to fit into one mold for how it should be done "correctly." Rather, it is co-created when empathy partners are able to explore their

feelings and needs in a vulnerable, caring, and loving way. It also values the multifaceted identities of both empathy partners. In each of these ways, the students demonstrated that by week 15 they had progressed in their thinking to adopt an understanding of empathy that would be founded on a transactional model of communication. In addition, the theory of symbolic interaction was used to guide the analysis process. However, while analyzing the data for this research question, it became clear that an additional communication theory was needed in order to provide greater depth into the students' intellectual progression of the way communication facilitated empathy. As a result of this, the theory of message design logic was used to supplement the theoretical framework of symbolic interaction. Hence, one of the exciting results of my research on empathic communication is the heuristic extension of message design logic, which I will focus on first.

The Message Design Logic of Empathic Communication

Chapter 5 explained that in order to unpack the transformation process that students went through over the course of the semester, as it relates to their understanding of how communication contributes to the production of empathy, it was necessary to look for communication theories that supplemented the concepts generated from the transmission, interactional, and transactional models. After considering many communication theories, the theory of Message Design Logic was used because of the way it delineates three different types of working models of communication people can use to accomplish various communicative goals, in this case that goal was empathy. However, Chapter 5 also noted that applying Message Design Logic may seem like an odd fit for a study that didn't record, transcribe, or look at actual communicative

messages that get uttered during an interaction, which is what the vast majority of research using this theory has done (Hullman, 2004). Yet, I believe that the way I have applied the theory further shows the merits of conceptualizing communicative thinking in individuals in terms of different design logics. By demonstrating how the data for research question two could be explained and analyzed using O'Keefe's (1988) three design logics, I have extended her theory in an innovative and useful direction. In addition, the way that the students' thinking progressed throughout the semester toward a more rhetorical design logic further lends support to the utility of O'Keefe's theory. Truly, as Chapter 5 demonstrated, many of the attributes that have been codified in the three different design logics (i.e., expressive, conventional, and rhetorical) surfaced in the working models of the journal keepers' definitions of empathy. But by applying this theory to the data, the students' answers also demonstrated that perhaps we can broaden our understanding as a communicative community on what it means to communicate from a sophisticated design logic. This can be done in the following way.

Looking at the six themes from the students' week 15 definitions above and the way many of them are descriptive of the way O'Keefe has characterized what it means to communicate from a rhetorical design logic, it is possible to also argue that they provide a more nuanced conception of what it means to be a rhetorical communicator, thus bringing greater complexity to the theory of message design logic. For example, O'Keefe (1997) has defined a rhetorical design logic as a communicator's ability to address their own goals during an interaction, while simultaneously being aware of the needs and goals of their interactional partner. This ability requires a greater degree of cognitive creativity and communicative flexibility to negotiate various situations with relational competence.

Furthermore, this design logic manifests a sophisticated level of understanding, embraces the belief of equifinality, and highlights the importance of the co-created nature of communication. Chapter 5 described how many of these attributes emerged from the journal keepers' week 15 definitions of empathy. However, what wasn't necessary to discuss in that chapter, but is worthy of discussion in this chapter, is the way that the journal keepers' conceptualization of communication processes, as manifested through achieving the co-creation of empathy in interaction, builds on the way O'Keefe conceptualizes sophisticated communication, and indeed, extends her theorizing in a couple of ways. Specifically, by focusing on the working models of the students' understanding of communication processes, rather than actual messages that they utter during a conversation, my study demonstrates the utility of expanding the notion of "message design logic" to "empathic communicative conceptual design logic."

The way we conceptualize the nature of interactions, or the schemata that we adopt, drives the way we communicate and influences the expectations and perceived options we have during an interaction. As a result of this, understanding the various blue prints that people use to approach various situations can be instructive toward understanding why interactions get produced in a certain ways. Understanding the empathic communicative conceptual design logics that individuals can embrace can help those interested in teaching or cultivating empathy to advance concepts that lead to a more sophisticated, adaptable, and person-centered understanding of how empathy is co-created in interaction. This is a worthy and insightful extension of O'Keefe's (1988) original theory of message design logic. Consequently, this is not the only notable extension to this theory that can be drawn from my research study. A second insight into

design logics centers on the longitudinal nature of my research. As the literature review pointed out, there have been very few studies that have looked at the way a person's conceptualization of empathy changes over time. Moreover, there has yet to be a study that has attempted to track the way a person's design logic of empathic communication changes over time.

Aligning with the "utterance" concept that is central to the theory of message design logic, these studies have focused on the way message production has changed over time. My study provides insight into the cognitive schemata that produces the messages, and demonstrates in what ways empathy experiences and instruction can foster a change in a person's communicative design logics, as it relates to empathy. In this way, my study underscores the usefulness of looking at the process of change in a person's design logics as it modifies over time. Not only does this help us understand the way communication can facilitate a richer perspective of empathy production between people, but it helps us gain a better appreciation of how communication instruction can move us beyond cognitive and emotion centric definitions that fail to account for the communicative depth that can be generated when two people engage in jointly producing empathy. Consequently, these heuristic additions to the application of message design logic theory, as they relate to empathy, are not the only way my research extended our collective understanding of empathy. It also invited us to consider the way we think and research about what it means to be an empathic listener.

Earlier in this dissertation, it was pointed out that the concept of empathic listening has been promoted as a valuable form of empathy in various fields and contexts. The primary champions of this concept, as it relates to research studies and academic

essays, have been in the medical field and field of psychology, beginning with Carl

Rogers (1957). However, collectively this research focused on listening as a linear tool

that allows an empathy giver access to the internal state of an empathy receiver, or has

focused on measuring specific empathic listening scales as a way to measure a person's

capacity for being an empathic listener. The literature reviews of Pence and Vickery

(2012) and Bodie et al. (2013) on empathic listening highlight this body of research.

However, in the literature review for this study it was pointed out that communication

scholar Stewart (1983) countered this type of research by advocating for a reimagining of

empathic listening, one that "can help turn [individuals] away from the tendency to

objectify selves" and instead help them be "sensitive to the communicating that is

happening between or among persons" (p. 389). Instead of listening for closure or

accuracy, he posited that the essence of empathic listening should be to "listen your way

into new relationships because of the mutually-creative contact that occurs between

persons" (p. 389). From this position, empathic listening is not a tool or an attribute to be

measured, but rather a way of facilitating connection and joint understanding. However,

in the literature review it was also pointed out that since Stewart's call for a new

understanding of empathic listening, scholars have only furthered their focus on

quantifying empathic listening, seeing it as a linear process and an operational tool

(Bodie, 2011; Bodie et al., 2013; Johnston et al., 2000; Vickery, Keaton, & Bodie, 2015;

Watson, Barker, & Weaver, 1995; Weaver, Watson, & Barker, 1996).

  Based on the nature of this research, the more developed understanding of

empathy that the journal keepers gained by week 15 reconnects empathic listening with

the position advocated by Stewart (1983). In the analysis chapter for research question

two it was pointed out that many of the students' final conceptualizations of empathy showed an appreciation of open ended and relational-oriented attributes of empathic listening. They shifted from their earlier (week 1) theorizing about listening as a way to accurately assess a person's internal state to one in which empathy partners are willing to explore each other's worlds in an effort to *try* and understand each other, creating a feeling of connection *between* them. These insights can serve as a call to the academic community to move the theorizing about empathic listening beyond scales, questionnaires, and "tool" paradigms, and to further explore the transactional nature of empathic communication. My research only scratches the surface of this and shows that there is clearly more ground to explore in this area of empathy research. It's been more than 30 years since Stewart's (1983) call for such focus, yet little has been done in that time to heed the call. Hence, the insights that emerged from my data can serve as a new call for more exploratory research in this area.

While Stewart (1983) was speaking specifically about listening, Chapter 2 noted that some other scholars have advocated for re-centering our notion of empathy in general as a communicative phenomenon that moves us beyond looking at individual sender and receivers and instead repositions empathy as a collaborative activity (Broome, 1991; DeTurk, 2001). Specifically, Broome (1991) posited that, "the development of shared meaning must move the focus beyond both self and other to the interaction between communicators" (p. 247). In addition, rather than focusing on the cognitive exercise of one individual attempting to place themselves into the situation of another individual, which implies a crossing of experiential borders between two people, DeTurk (2001) advocates for an empathic perspective that removes borders and focuses on the

interconnectedness of the human experience. From this perspective, DeTurk invites empathy theorists to move past "the previous psychological approaches to empathy in favor of an interpretive communication perspective that locates the phenomenon in relationships rather than within individuals" (p. 376). Looking holistically at the students' week 15 definitions, it can be argued that many of the students shifted their thinking in this direction. Not only does this shift build on the concepts of Broome (1991) and DeTurk (2001), it advances a paradigm shift in the way we research and teach empathy. I'll save this discussion for my final thought of this chapter. However, before moving on, let me highlight a couple of minor topics that emerged in the data, topics from research question two that also warrant consideration for future research.

Before closing this section of the chapter, I feel it would be a mistake to fail to highlight at least two minor perceptions that surfaced in the journal keepers' week 15 definitions of empathy. While only a few students addressed these, I believe they are areas of promise for future research. The first of these is the idea that empathy is not only something that can bring connection in moments when people are feeling distressed or dark emotions but rather, in many ways, it is empathy that gives us the capacity to connect with others in moments of joy and celebration. We can equally invest in someone's light emotions and the situations surrounding them as we can in their moments of stress, pain, or sadness. This is a promising area of research that has been overlooked by empathy scholars and would be an illuminating topic for future research.

The second idea that a small number of journal keepers pointed to that is an interesting concept worthy of exploration, is the idea that individuals can cultivate empathy for the self. On the surface, this idea would seem to make little sense, as the

foundation of empathy has always focused on our abilities to look outward and invest in the plight of another. Indeed, this entire research study has focused on that concept. However, there are some who believe that it is possible to reflexively look back on ourselves in an empathic way, as if we were standing outside of ourselves, in order to access deeper insights into what we are experiencing and feeling (Rosenberg, 2003). This is an idea that Mead (1934) might find intriguing because of his belief that people develop meaning by observing their own actions, i.e., looking at the self as an object. This idea obviously involves intrapersonal communication and the very concept is not without its critics who believe it goes against the foundation of what empathy is and does (Krznaric, 2014). Consequently, there has been little academic research in this area, and thus, it is a potential direction that future empathy researchers could explore. As one interested in the relational and communicative applications of empathy, I have little interest in pursuing this type of empathy research. Having acknowledged that, I will now turn my attention to the recommendations and limitations of the study.

<u>Limitations and Recommendations</u>

Specific recommendations for further research and for the practical use of the findings that emerged from this project were discussed above, in the review of each research question. As a result this section will focus more globally on the trajectory of empathy research that I believe needs to be pursued. In addition, this section will focus on the limitations of the study. For a detailed accounting of the limitations of the methodology, as it relates to my agency, power, and identity, please refer back to the methods chapter where I detail the way those aspects have potential limited or influenced

the way this study was conducted. Because those aspects were covered in that chapter, in this section I will identify more holistically, some of the limitations of the study. Based on this, the following portion will proceed by first addressing the limitations and then the recommendations.

Limitations

With any study, choices have to be made about the scope of the study and the way to approach the topic or subject under investigation. Thus, no study can be all inclusive in its design. At the inception of my study, I made the decision to qualitatively explore the lived experiences of students by having them journal about empathy experiences and receive instruction on empathy and communication in order to unpack the way their understanding of empathic communication either changed or didn't change over the course of a semester.

While I moved the scope of empathy outside of the medical and psychology fields, into the personal lives of individuals, it must be acknowledged that this group of individuals could be considered homogenous in its make-up. By that I mean the majority of the journal keepers were young adults, attending the same university, experiencing many of the same struggles that accompany the transitional and challenging college years. As a result of this, a definite limitation of the study is that it might have produced even richer insights had the journals been taken from a cross section of individuals across multiple demographics and life stages. This is why I have, on multiple occasions, reminded the readers throughout this document that the findings of the study are not meant to be generalized beyond the experiences of those participating in the project, but

merely to act as fodder for consideration on how empathic communication might work in other settings. However, it still could be argued that a limitation to the study is that gaining a larger sampling of journals would have produced even greater clarity to various empathic concepts and communicative dynamics. For example, the empathy codes might have looked different had I been able to explore a wider range of people at various life stages or they might have looked different had I targeted specific contexts or relationships, such as family, friends, or romantic relationships. These would be interesting areas to explore in future research projects.

Another potential limitation that some could point to is the one-sided data that were generated for research question one. It could seem a bit problematic to advocate for greater research on the co-created nature of empathy, only to collect data from "empathy receivers" in order to answer the first research question. I would accept such a criticism and respond in this way. I agree, the data would have been richer had I collected empathy journal accounts from the "empathy givers" who participated in the interactions that were used to as experiential learning. Indeed, it would have been interesting to explore their perspectives on the empathy interaction and the way meanings were constructed. Gaining this type of perspective will be valuable in future research, research that I hope to do, which will be a nice heuristic extension of what I have already done in this project.

Finally, the insights generated by this project would have been made richer had I included a reflexive loop in the data analysis, similar to researchers who conduct oral histories. It would have been insightful to conduct interviews with some of the journal keepers to probe more fully into the way I have understood and represented their definitions and empathy journal accounts. I considered doing this, but in the end, made

the decision to stay focused on the data I had collected and to let it speak for itself. Two contributing factors in making this decision were as follows. First, by the time I had analyzed the data and written about the concepts that emerged, more than a year had passed since I had collected that data, making it nearly impossible to track down the students (most of whom were seniors when they took the course). Secondly, I actually tested the waters with two students I could locate, and conducted informal interviews that probed into their experiences in the class and asking for added perspective into their empathy journals and what I had found in the data up to that point. One of the primary reasons I selected these students was that they had shown to be very engaged during the semester. However, upon conducting my informal interviews, it became evident that too much time had elapsed for them to remember specifically details about their journals and their overall experiences in the class. For these reasons, I elected to not pursue adding data generated from interviews to the project. Now, having explicated the limitations of the project, let me conclude by offering up some recommendations for further research on empathic communication.

<u>Recommendations</u>

As stated earlier, while articulating the way my research extends our collective knowledge during this chapter, I also provided some recommendations for further research along the way. It felt appropriate to connect them directly to the concept or idea being addressed. However, in this section I will provide a quick synopsis of those areas and offer a couple of further recommendations after looking holistically at my research project.

Looking specifically at the first research question, the two strongest themes that emerged from the data were, first, the importance that turning-points and nexting played in the empathy interactions of the students; and second, the different primary and secondary empathy codes that surfaced as empathic communication behaviors. The first of these built on previous research on the sequential nature of empathic communication by showing that the empathy dances described by the students were generated following a shift to vulnerable communication by an empathy receiver, followed by the use of one or more of the empathic codes provided by the empathy giver. Earlier it was pointed out that the concept of vulnerability has largely been ignored in the research on empathic communication, thus making my contribution important toward advancing our collective understanding of this concept. Considering this, future research would add to our understanding of empathy by further exploring the way vulnerability, from a communicative standpoint, influences empathic transactions. In many ways, it feels like we have only scratched the surface of this concept, as we could benefit from a much more complex understanding and awareness of how important it is in empathy construction, for both empathy partners. In addition to this, my study showed that we need to further explore the sequential nature of empathic interactions. Only a handful of studies have done this and there is still much to learn about how various empathy dances unfold step by step, throughout the entire process. For example, it would be interesting to explore how empathy conversations end, what patterns of interaction lead to the conclusion of this type of communication, perhaps one in which one or both partners walk away feeling like they just experienced empathy. I simply didn't have access to this in my data, but intuitively, it makes sense that the way that empathy conversations end

must be crucial to the process, as it is last thing that frames the entire conversation.

In addition to recommendations about the sequential nature of empathic communication, there is also a need for a more complex understanding of empathy codes both verbal and nonverbal and the way they work together. The experiential journaling of the students highlighted the importance of crafting cathartic conversations that demonstrated a variety of ways individuals can verbally communicate empathy, such as verbal statements of advice and spirituality. This is a fertile place for more research, i.e., designing studies that further explore the types of verbal statements that help distressed individuals feel empathy. In my opinion, one of the most interesting findings that resulted from this research project was the important role that nonverbal communication played in empathic communication. The descriptions of the students provided a much more nuanced and layered understanding of nonverbal empathic behaviors. For example, there is virtually no research focusing on empathy and chronemics or proxemics, yet I felt that the insights the students generated on these two modalities were extremely insightful and a strong addition that my research makes to the academic dialogue of empathy.

The second research question focused on the way the students' understanding of empathy changed over the course of the semester and how their implicit models of communication influenced that process. This opened the door for future research to look at the way design logics influence empathic communication process. Whereas my study focused on understanding their working models of communication, as it relates to their conceptualization of empathy, it would be interesting to take this one step further and explore how they actually engage in empathic communication based on their new, more sophisticated design logics. Engaging in this type of research was beyond the scope of

my study but the path that I have created carves out a space for future research in this area. Furthermore, by identifying the way the students' understanding of empathy transformed throughout the semester, my study invites all of those interesting in teaching and training empathy to reconsider their approaches.

The literature review detailed the research that has been done on empathy learning and teaching and it showed that there is a need for more research and approaches that focus on the transactional nature of empathic communication. Given this need, the research I conducted serves as a valuable contribution to those who want to teach or foster communities or cultures of empathy. The present research project demonstrates that one potential way to do that effectively is to focus on increasing individuals' understanding of communicative processes, processes that construct and co-create empathic communication. While my study is small and not meant to be generalized beyond its scope, it does provide an invitation for researchers, teachers, and practitioners to reconsider the way they theorize, teach, and practice empathy. The implications of my research study can have direct connections to healthcare and practitioners in general. Specifically, because empathy is not something that we do to people but rather, empathy is something that we co-create, realization that we must change our empathy dance to conform to our empathy partners is needed. Practically speaking, these fields can begin teaching doctors, practitioners, and instructors how to view empathy through a more transactional lens. This will require a paradigm shift in thinking and move us beyond focusing on teaching individuals to the concepts of teaching empathy to relationships. Additionally, my research has indicated that different dance partners may have different empathy languages or different empathy codes, which requires empathy dancers to be

sensitive to their dance partner's individual needs and adapt their empathy to find the codes that each partner needs in order to sustain the dance. Ultimately, my study advocates for making communication more central to our collective understanding of empathy.

The Transformative Power of Empathic Communication

After completing this project and analyzing the data, perhaps the biggest epiphany I had as a researcher and teacher came when thinking of the practical implications of the findings that emerged, and the importance of teaching empathy to relationships rather than to people. By this I mean there is a need to broaden the scope of empathy training beyond one-sided approaches where empathy "skills" are taught to psychologist or medical personnel so that they can "use" it on their clients and patients. What is needed instead are trainings, programs, and teaching that move empathy production beyond this limited and linear position, and toward instruction and coaching that involve groups of people. How much more powerful would it be for a psychologist to teach a family how to co-create empathy, rather than simply to teach one "distressed" family member how to approach the individuals in their family from an empathic orientation, ultimately, as the empathy giver? How transformative could it be to teach a community or hospital staff to collaboratively embrace an empathy culture between them, rather than teaching individual medical personnel to use it on patients? Wouldn't patients "feel" and respond favorably to a community of people that understand how to co-create empathy and that work with mutuality towards fostering empathic connections on all levels? Approaching empathic communication instruction in this way would build on other works and words

of researchers and practitioners that have advocated for a system's approach to relational change (Greenberg & Goldman, 2008; Johnson, 2008; Napier & Whitaker, 1978; Rogers & Escudero, 2004; Satir, 1988).

In order to do reconfigure the way we think about and teach empathy, it would require a monumental shift in the way we have approached empathy, from a psychological and affective position that focuses on empathy as a communicative accomplishment. What is needed are more models, theories, and concepts that teach what it means to co-create empathy in relationships: models and theories that promote the type of insights generated by the students' sophisticated week 15 definitions, namely, that empathy is not merely something that people send towards others in an attempt to accurately identify their perspective and pinpoint their exact emotions, thus allowing them to "respond correctly" and show that they have hit the empathic bull's eye. Indeed, communities and relationships would benefit from conceptualizing empathy in the way that the students did by the end of the semester. By drawing on a transactional model of communication and using a rhetorically sophisticated design logic, they can gain a deeper understanding for the relational aspects of empathy, the value of the way it reciprocally transforms both partners, and the way it blends two identities and fields of experience into what has been called a "third culture." Casmir (1999) describes this "third culture" as "the construction of a mutually beneficial interactive environment in which individuals from two different cultures [or background] can function in a way beneficial to all involved" (p. 92). This mutually beneficial interactivity can happen with equifinality as every relationship and context surrounding any empathic interaction is unique and requires the ability to adapt to the empathic music that frames the empathy dance

necessary for connection.

These insights are only supplemented with the observations that surfaced for research question one, that empathic communication is always contingent on the relational contextual dynamics involved in any empathic interaction. Also, this means that it is problematic to teach empathy codes as a blue print on how to "give" empathy to distressed "receivers." Rather, the data for this study revealed that understanding empathy codes can raise our awareness to the types of behaviors that can be meaningful as empathy partners seek to co-create an empathy dance *between* them. Thus, understanding empathy codes can broaden our appreciation for the options we have to find meaningful forms of communication in jointly producing empathy. However, it is essential to recognize that the utility of this understanding is to struggle to find the codes that are the most meaningful for the empathy partners involved. This is a righteous struggle that focuses on cultivating an appreciation for relationships, rather than techniques. When individuals can think and conceptualize empathy on this level, they will work toward developing transactional communication that is tailored to the people they are present with, not merely on learning to activate their empathic skills in a generic way that one-dimensionally believes empathy is a one-size-fits-all approach.

Truly, my research has shown that research and teaching that focuses on this type of empathic communication will be able to not only greatly enrich our appreciation for nuances of this type of communication, but more importantly, its application will benefit the lives of individuals immersed in relationships and communities, as they work in concert with each other to co-create empathy between them in a way that sustains and nourishes the fiber of their connections.

APPENDIX A

SYLLABUS OF THE COURSE USED FOR THIS STUDY

COMM 3110: REAL-ATIONSHIPS & EMOTIONS
Spring 2013; Thursday 6 -8:45pm

"Intimate relationships are the most important guiding force in human development. Throughout the life course the quality of close personal relationships can promote or undermine our psychological and physical health; our security, well-being, and competencies; and the way we view ourselves-whether we see ourselves as valued and worthwhile or as deficient and un-worthy"

~ E. Mavis Hetherington
(2003, p.318)

Instructor: Paul Parkin	**Office:** 2960 LNCO
Office Hours: Thursdays after class and by appointment	
Email: paulhparkin@gmail.com	**Classroom:** WEB L114

I. Course Description & Objectives:
This class will seek to raise your level of awareness in many areas and aspects of your personal and relational life. Using positive psychology (with a particular emphasis in socio-psychological principles) and relational and communication theory – students will examine the role that emotions play in the development and maintenance of intimate relationships. In addition, students will assess various communicative behaviors and dynamics that are common to intimate relationships from a systems theoretical framework. Lastly, students will be required to apply the insights gained into their lives in order to create a healthier view of themselves and develop stronger, more enjoyable connections with the people in their life that matter most.

Course Goals: There are several overall course goals. However, different goals may develop as we journey through the semester, and you may also find that you have initial or changing personal goals.

These were listed on the course syllabus as follows:
   To Understand*: We will learn about communication between people by:*
   - *Studying* basic communication theory and related theories from other fields
   - *Informing* ourselves about a wide-range of research findings

To Apply: We will build our understanding by:
- *Relating* communication processes to the real-world contexts in which they occur,
- and *Applying* our understandings to events and situations in our own lives

To Practice: We will personalize and enrich our understandings through activities and opportunities to make what we learn more concrete by:
- *Experiencing* the enactment and outcomes of using the concepts we are studying,
- and *Trying Out* alternatives for communicating with others under a variety of condition

Credit: This class is a 3 credit course and fulfills the Interpersonal Sequence, group 4, requirement.

II. Instruction Methods:
This course uses lecture, discussion, intra-group activities, observation, out-of-class assignments, videos, and readings to teach and promote learning and growth in multiple directions.

III. Textbook(s):
> Ben-Shahar, T. (2007). *Happier: Learn the secrets of daily joy and lasting fulfillment.* New York: McGraw-Hill.
> Additional readings can be accessed from Canvas (see the end of syllabus for dates and authors)

Students are expected to have read the assigned **before** they come to class.

IV. Course Outline
Assignments and Assessments:
Assignments are due on the date specified and should be ready to go at the beginning of each class period. The following is breakdown of the percentage points and a brief overview of the assignments and assessments (more detailed descriptions will be posted on WebCT).

Attendance and Participation	25%
Application Assessment 1	25%
Application Assessment 2	25%
Group Presentation	25%
Total	100%

*Meaningful Attendance & Participation***:** My intention is to create a vibrant, engaging learning experience. Most of class time will be spent in lecture, discussion, and group work. You are expected to be present and prepared to make contributions to your own learning. Therefore, attendance and participation is mandatory. Active participation means that you will demonstrate your preparedness for class and contribute to class activities. Specifically, I expect you to read assigned material prior to class, actively engage in class discussions, be willing to ask questions, attend regularly, willingly participate in class activities/group assignments, and fulfill all of the empathy journal entries. Absences, lack of participation and failure to complete the journal entries will lower your final grade.

Application Assessments 1 & 2: There will not be formal exams in this course. However, I want

to see that students understand key course concepts and can apply them to actual communicative situations. Thus, there will be two Application Assessment days this semester that will require students to apply course concepts based on case studies. These will not be boring days – this should be a fun way to apply what you are learning. More details will be given later.

Group Presentation: I am a firm believer in group activities and there potential for learning and growth. In order to help students apply the relational concepts and gain greater insight into specific course concepts – students will be asked to do a group presentation on one of the weekly readings. These presentations should be both educational and fun for the class. A detailed rubric will be posted to WebCT.

V. Grading Procedures:

Grades will be assigned as follows:

A= 94-100 %	B = 84-87 %	C = 74-77 %	D = 64-67 %
A- = 90-93 %	B- = 80-83 %	C- = 70-73 %	D- = 60-63 %
B+ = 88-89 %	C+ = 78-79 %	D+ = 68-69 %	F = 0-59 %

VI. University & Class Policies:

1. **ADA:** The University of Utah seeks to provide equal access to its programs, services and activities for people with disabilities. If you will need accommodations in the class, reasonable prior notice needs to be given to the Center for Disability Services, 162 Olpin Union Building, 581-5020 (V/TDD). CDS will work with you and the instructor to make arrangements for accommodations. All written information in this course can be made available in alternative format with prior notification to the Center for Disability Services. Please talk with me immediately to discuss any necessary accommodations.

2. **Drop/Withdrawal Policy:** The University's drop/withdrawal policy is available on the University's website and from Student Services. Briefly, you may drop a course during the first ten calendar days of the semester without tuition charges and withdaw (with a "W") during the first nine weeks. After that, withdrawal is possible only "in cases of compelling non-academic emergencies" through petition to the dean of your college. For further information, consult the course schedule or contact the Registrar's Office at 801-581-8968.

3. **Student Conduct:** The Student Code spells out specific rights of students in the classroom. The Code also specifies proscribed conduct, including cheating on exams, collusion and plagiarism. **Plagiarism is submitting someone else's work as your own, including but not limited to submitting a paper or giving a presentation obtained on the internet or through other sources. It also includes representing as one's own, ideas, phrases, or any other content of expression without attribution to the original source. Any student found guilty of plagiarism will receive an "E" for the course.**

4. **Assignment Due Dates:** As a general policy, no late papers or presentations will be accepted and no make up or extra credit assignments will be allowed. Decisions to accept late papers or allow a make up assignments will be based on extreme individual circumstances and grade penalties may apply.

5. **Accommodations:** Reasonable accommodation will be given to students who provide prior or

timely documentation of their unique circumstances (U of U sanctioned events, medical emergencies, etc.) which result in absence(s) or a missed assignment(s). If you need accommodation on any such basis, please contact me in the 1st week of class. Absence from class for other reasons does not need to be discussed with me and will result in lost points from your final grade. Curriculum or content accommodations will not be made for this course. Course material has been carefully selected to meet the pedagogical needs of this course. You are encouraged to thoroughly review the syllabus and readings as soon as possible to determine if this is a course you wish to take. The University's Accommodation Policy can be found at: http://admin.utah.edu/facdev/pdf/accommodations-policy.pdf

6. **Maintain and Update Your Email Address:** Each student is required to update and maintain a current email address on the university Campus Information System (CIS). This will allow me to send class or individual emails regarding assignments, changes in schedule or syllabus, and other notices of importance. To update or add your current email address, go to the CIS login page (http://gate.acs.utah.edu), sign on with your uNID and password, and click "Change Email" in the "Update Student Profile" box.

7. **Canvas:** This course makes use of the online supplements provided by Web Course Tools (Canvas). You will find announcements, assignments, and supplemental course material on WebCT so please become familiar with it and check in OFTEN.

FINAL THOUGHTS: This is a course that I personally created to be meaningful and applicable to your life outside of the classroom. However, in order for that to happen, you will need to engage the class inside of the classroom. You can do this by coming each week having done the readings, having done the exercises or writing assignments, and then fully engaging in the class discussions and activities. Students that have done this in the past have not only gotten A's in the class, but have given me feedback on how their life satisfaction and relational satisfaction increased significantly. For example, a student last semester got married and promised me his first born (just kidding… or am I?). Ultimately, I believe the material covered in this class is very powerful, *if you will allow it to be!*

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PROPOSED COURSE SCHEDULE   * *Subject to change as necessary*

Week	Date	Topic	Readings/Assignments
Week 1	01-10	Introduction to Course & Classmates	
Week 2	01-17	Reflexivity (J)	Palmer & Larson
Week 3	01-24	Empathy (J)	Colvalt, Brown
Week 4	01-31	GROUP WORK DAY	
Week 5	02-07	Adaptability (J)	Gottman (Ch 5) & Lerner
Week 6	02-14	Love (J)	**Guerrero** (Love)
Week 7	02-21	**Application Assessment 1**	
Week 8	02-28	Connection (J)	**Gottman (Cure-Ch. 1)** Gottman (Love Maps),
Week 9	03-07	Sexuality (J)	**Guerrrero (Sexuality)**
	03-14	**SPRING BREAK**	
Week 10	03-21	Collisions & Collaboration (J)	Stone, Patton, & Heen **(Chap 1,** & 9)
Week 11	03-28	Happiness	**Ben-Shahar (Part1)** Peterson
Week 12	04-04	NO CLASS	
Week 13	04-11	Happiness & Relational Ethics (J)	**Ben-Shahar (Part 2)** Hardwig
Week 14	04-18	Happiness & Relational Wisdom	**Ben-Shahar (Part 3)** Rogers
Week 15	04-25	**Application Assessment 2**	**Portfolio Due** *(Turn in portfolio)*

 NOTE: Bolded readings above (in the right column) are those that groups will present on – and the (J) dates indicate class sessions that you will be expected to bring a journal entry to class.

This syllabus is subject to change per the discretion of the instructor at any time.

APPENDIX B

EXAMPLE OF OPEN CODING OF RESEARCH QUESTION ONE

Receiving empathy from good relationship Female receiving empathy from man Touching on shoulder Providing counter example of touching Empathy attempt from 'church' leader Feeling disconnected to empathy partner Touching on knee Violating personal space Failed empathy attempt Critical moment	*"Because I already had a good relationship with him, I felt perfectly comfortable with his gentle touch on my shoulder. In a similar situation with an ecclesiastical leader a similar touch had a completely opposite effect, because it distracted me from feeling connection with the person and wondering instead why he was touching my knee. In the second situation I felt that my personal space had been violated which unfortunately negated any kind of closeness and empathy I had felt that I was receiving up until that point."(B-24)*
Context: leaving on mission Feeling many strong emotions Saying goodbye to brother Relationship producing strong emotions Hugging No words needed Facial expression communicates Perception of affective empathy Perception of cognitive empathy Perception of love through nonverbal gestures	*"I was leaving on my mission and feeling some of the strongest emotions of my life. A mixture of homesickness, fear, sadness, and excitement (mostly sadness upon leaving my little brother). He has always been my best friend and I hated leaving him for two years. When we hugged goodbye, he didn't have to say anything, the look he gave me said it all. I could tell he truly felt my pain of leaving, and that he was there for me, cheering me on and wishing me well despite it. I could also tell that he loved me and was going to miss me as much as I was going to miss him. It was one of the*

| Transformative empathy moment | *most powerful moments of empathy in my entire life." (B-8)* |

APPENDIX C

EXAMPLE OF FOCUSED CODING OF RESEARCH QUESTION ONE

Receiving empathy from good relationship Touching on shoulder Providing counter example of touching Touching on knee Violating touch expectations	*"Because I already had a good relationship with him, I felt perfectly comfortable with his gentle touch on my shoulder. In a similar situation with an ecclesiastical leader a similar touch had a completely opposite effect, because it distracted me from feeling connection with the person and wondering instead why he was touching my knee. In the second situation I felt that my personal space had been violated which unfortunately negated any kind of closeness and empathy I had felt that I was receiving up until that point."(B-24)*
Turning point Precipitating event – feeling many emotions Hugging Facial expressions Emotive power of nonverbal communication Turning point	*"I was leaving on my mission and feeling some of the strongest emotions of my life. A mixture of homesickness, fear, sadness, and excitement (mostly sadness upon leaving my little brother). He has always been my best friend and I hated leaving him for two years. When we hugged goodbye, he didn't have to say anything, the look he gave me said it all. I could tell he truly felt my pain of leaving, and that he was there for me, cheering me on and wishing me well despite it. I could also tell that he loved me and was going to miss me as much as I was going to miss him. It was one of the most powerful moments of empathy in my entire life." (B-8)*

APPENDIX D

EXAMPLE OF AXIAL CODING OF RESEARCH QUESTION ONE

Receiving empathy from good relationship	RELATIONSHIP MATTERS
Touching on shoulder	HAPTICS
Providing counter example of touching	HAPTICS
Touching on knee	TOUCH ETHIC
Violating touch expectations	TURNING POINTS
Turning point	INITATING
Precipitating event – feeling many emotions	HAPTICS
Hugging	KINESICS
Facial expressions	POWER OF NONVERBAL
Emotive power of nonverbal communication	TURNING POINTS
Turning point	

APPENDIX E

FINAL LIST OF CODES FOR RESEARCH QUESTION ONE

PRIMARY CODES

       A. Verbal expressions of identification
       B. Verbal expressions of difference
       C. Haptics
       D. Chronemics
       E. Kinesics

SECONDARY CODES

       F. Proxemics
       G. Vocalics
       H. Verbal statements of spirituality
       I. Verbal statements of advice
       J. Verbal statements of validation

COMMUNICATIVE PATTERNS

       K. Turning points
       L. Turn taking

APPENDIX F

EXAMPLE OF OPEN CODING FOR RESEARCH QUESTION TWO:

WEEK 1 DEFINITIONS

Having sympathy and feeling for other living things and their situations. Sympathy can be positive or negative but always is based on awareness of others. (A14)	Sympathizing Feeling for Applying to living things/situation Positive or negative Generating awareness of others
The ability to put yourself in the shoes of another and consider how they may feel or think about a situation. One then allows that understanding to influence how they think or act moving forward in decisions that may or may not involve that individual. (A-19)	Metaphor – Shoes of another Perceiving another's feelings Perceiving another's situation Acting on perceptions Moving beyond individual/context
Being able to understand and feel for others emotions and feelings in a way that shows you care for them (A22)	Achieving emotional understanding Feeling for Showing you care
"Empathy is when you put yourself in other person shoes. It is the ability to connect with people, understand their situation and the ability to feel their emotions." (B-8)	Metaphor – Shoes of another Connecting with others Understanding other's situation Feeling emotions of another
"Empathy is something you feel when you can relate to someone emotionally. You can truly empathize with someone when you can put yourself in someone else's position and understand exactly how they	A feeling Relating to another's emotions Perceiving another's position Understanding exact emotions of

feel." (B-14)	another
"Empathy is showing love and understanding towards others." (B-30)	Showing love Showing understanding Acting towards another

APPENDIX G

EXAMPLE OF FOCUSED CODING FOR RESEARCH QUESTION TWO:

WEEK 1 DEFINITIONS

Having sympathy and feeling for other living things and their situations. Sympathy can be positive or negative but always is based on awareness of others. (A14)	Sympathizing Feeling for
The ability to put yourself in the shoes of another and consider how they may feel or think about a situation. One then allows that understanding to influence how they think or act moving forward in decisions that may or may not involve that individual. (A-19)	Perspective taking Enacting linear response
Being able to understand and feel for others emotions and feelings in a way that shows you care for them (A22)	Feeling for Showing you care
"Empathy is when you put yourself in other person shoes. It is the ability to connect with people, understand their situation and the ability to feel their emotions." (B-8)	Perspective taking Connecting Feeling emotions of another
"Empathy is something you feel when you can relate to someone emotionally. You can truly empathize with someone when you can put yourself in someone else's position and understand exactly how they feel." (B-14)	A feeling Perspective taking Achieving exact emotional understanding
"Empathy is showing love and understanding towards others." (B-30)	Acting towards another

APPENDIX H

FINAL LIST OF CODES FOR RESEARCH QUESTION TWO:

WEEK 1 DEFINITIONS

THEORETICAL CONSTRUCTS OF EMPATHIC PROCESS (FROM COMMUNICATION PERSPECTIVE)

1. Linear communication activity

    a. Sent towards another

    b. Transmitted by giver

2. Achieved by hitting target

    a. Returning the 'right message' back to receiver

    b. Acquiring perfect understanding of emotional state of target

3. Psychologically driven process

    a. Putting self in someone's shoes (perspective taking)

    b. Feeling for another

APPENDIX I

EXAMPLE OF OPEN CODING FOR RESEARCH QUESTION TWO:

WEEK 15 DEFINITIONS

Being able to feel somebody else's pain, happiness, sorrow, excitement, and being able to fully be happy for them, sad for them, angry for them, excited for them and actually caring about how that person feels and desperately trying to understand their feelings. (A-9)	Feeling another's light/dark emotions Being "fully" invested in another "Actually caring" about another Trying to understand another's feelings
Empathy is fully listening, trying to understand and possibly being able to relate to a person's story whether you know them or not but keeping in mind where they are coming from and having no judgment. (A-11)	"Fully" listening Trying to understand Trying to relate to another's story Applying it to all relationships Being nonjudgmental
The ability to be with people, not just physically but mentally as well. To not judge, to share, to comfort, to understand. Empathy is understanding or trying to really get what someone is going through. (A-30)	Mentally/physically being present Being nonjudgmental Sharing Comforting Trying to understand someone's situation
"Empathy is to genuinely care about your relationship with another person. It is to try to put yourself in their shoes and care for them, as you should yourself. Empathy takes courage and the ability to forgive. It is not easy but is crucial in making and building relationships." (B-5)	"Genuinely" caring about relationship Metaphor – putting self in other's shoes Caring for others, as yourself Requires courage Requires forgiveness Requires effort Building relationships

"Empathy the ability to accept someone that is different from you and taking the time to give them a full, non-biased, open heart." (B-15)	Accepting differences Taking time Giving 'full, non-biased, open heart'

APPENDIX J

EXAMPLE OF FOCUSED CODING FOR RESEARCH QUESTION TWO:

WEEK 15 DEFINITIONS

Being able to feel somebody else's pain, happiness, sorrow, excitement, and being able to fully be happy for them, sad for them, angry for them, excited for them and actually caring about how that person feels and desperately trying to understand their feelings. (A-9)	Being 'fully' invested in another's light/dark emotions Trying to understand another's feelings Trying to understand & relate
Empathy is fully listening, trying to understand and possibly being able to relate to a person's story whether you know them or not but keeping in mind where they are coming from and having no judgment. (A-11)	Applying it to all relationships Being nonjudgmental Being present Being nonjudgmental
The ability to be with people, not just physically but mentally as well. To not judge, to share, to comfort, to understand. Empathy is understanding or trying to really get what someone is going through. (A-30)	Sharing Comforting Trying to understand "Genuinely" caring about relationship
"Empathy is to genuinely care about your relationship with another person. It is to try to put yourself in their shoes and care for them, as you should yourself. Empathy takes courage and the ability to forgive. It is not easy but is crucial in making and building relationships." (B-5)	Requires courage, forgiveness, effort Building relationships Accepting differences

"Empathy the ability to accept someone that is different from you and taking the time to give them a full, non-biased, open heart." (B-15)	Giving 'full, non-biased, open heart'

APPENDIX K

FINAL LIST OF CODES FOR RESEARCH QUESTION TWO:

WEEK 15 DEFINITIONS

THEORETICAL CONSTRUCTS OF EMPATHIC PROCESS

(FROM COMMUNICATION PERSPECTIVE)

1. Co-created between people

   a. Creating shared understanding

   b. Building relationships

2. Reciprocal communicative activity

   a. Nonlinear communication process

3. Listening focus

4. Complex levels of communication

   a. Level one – responding to immediate emotional messages

   b. Level two – appreciation for larger context, roles

   c. Level three – equifinality & person-centered

APPENDIX L

SAMPLE ENTRY OF MY RESEARCH/TEACHING JOURNAL

Journal Entry (1st Semester – Week 4): Tonight's class was unique, compared to the classes thus far in the semester. It seems like the students are really starting to get comfortable with each other.

I'm still worried that some of them are trying to please me too much with their comments and viewpoints. I know it is still kinda early in the semester, but I need to continue to draw them out of traditional 'please the teacher' mode and into a space where they feel that they can think freely and openly – regardless of what the teacher seems to be thinking on the matter. Although, I think the way I did the group discussions tonight really helped some students move in that direction.

Last week, when I did group discussions I gave them a set of questions based on the reading and had them discuss the points the author brings up. However, in retrospect I think my questions were a bit problematic and perhaps leading in the way they were phrased, no wonder the students echoed my position. But, tonight, I didn't do that… tonight I had them generate their own questions based on their journal entries. It seemed to force them to think for themselves more, because they had no idea what I thought of the reading at this point – or which parts stood out to me.

I think doing the discussions in thus way was also more holistic because by talking about their journal entries with each other, they were invited to bring more of their full 'selves' into the learning space.

Although, I'm still worried about student X. I need to find a way to get them to engage more. She is still barely participating in the group discussions. Perhaps next week I should put her with student Y or student Z – or both, to see if they can draw her out more. I don't think she's disinterested – I think there is a cultural gap or a fear of speaking in 'public.' I was hoping smaller discussion groups would solve that, but it doesn't seem to be making a difference. I'm

trying to decide if I should just talk to her about it – or if I should do that as a last resort – after I have tinkered with things more. I don't know. It is this point, I wish I could read their journals to see what she is thinking.

APPENDIX M

SAMPLE OF MY ANALYTIC MEMOS

Listening reimagined
The pattern is already starting to form on how many of the students have shifted in
their thinking about listening. I can tell that "Difficult Conversations" had an impact on
their thinking in this way – but it is more than that. There seems to be a new awareness
of listening as a connective process rather than an empathic technique that one person
employees in an empathic conversation. However, I fear that my excitement for this
shift is blinding me a little – I need to continue to be open to what the students are
actually saying –

I should sleep on this and then relook at the comparisons between week 1 and 15, as it
relates to the codes that emerged about listening. Perhaps I can look with fresh eyes
and see if there are other aspects of the class that are there that I am just not seeing
right now – and I need to make a stronger effort to distinguish how their new
conceptions of listening reveal a shift in their communicative models. The obvious
shift is from a linear model to a transactional one, but there has to be more than just
this –

Message Design Logic
After talking with Ann today, I feel really good about using MDL to explain what has
emerged from the data. I think it is the perfect theory to show the detailed ways the
students communicative theorizing became more nuanced and sophisticated over the
course of the semester. Just off the top of my head I think the expressive and rhetorical
design logics are going to be fairly easy to distinguish (for the most part) in much of
what they students have written – I think it will be the conventional logic that I will
need to really explore and think hard about – when looking at the data. I just need to
make sure I don't try to fit things into the MDL mold just to make them fit – if it
doesn't fit, then I should find another way to explain it – although, honestly, having
immersed myself in the data as much as I have – I think MDL casts a wide enough
theoretical net that I think most of the data can fit within the principles and tenets of
MDL.

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