Investigation of counselor empathy with respect to safe schools

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Received October 25, 2008; revised December 12, 2008; accepted January 2, 2009

Abstract

The aim of this research is to determine the empathic ability and empathic tendency levels of the counselors in order to mention the importance of self-efficacy to enhance school-wide prevention activities for safe schools; to professionally sufficient counselor profile; to offer community-wide suggestions for counselor education. The data was gathered by The Empathic Tendency Scale and The Empathic Ability Scale with a questionnaire. Participants consist 128 counselors from different work places in Izmir, Turkey. The empathy construct, its relation with the self-efficacy of counselors; with the characteristics of school-wide prevention activities are explained; results are discussed according to relevant literature.

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Keywords: Empathic tendency; empathic ability; counselors; self-efficacy; safe schools.

1. Introduction

There is an agreement on the literature that empathy is a core condition for providing effective counseling. Empathy has been described as the counselor’s ability to enter the client’s world, to feel with the client rather than for the client (Capuzzi & Gross, 1999), and to think with the client rather than about or for the client (Brammer, Abrego & Shostrum, 1993). When the person is open to own senses and impressions, he or she can only then be able to read the other’s feelings and impressions. Being lack of noticing the feelings of self and the other’s is a big emotional deficiency for a person according to emotional intelligence literature, thus this person can not relate them to the situations and even teach (Goleman, 1995). The motive to acknowledge own feelings and the skill to express them securely can ease one’s empathic responses. This emotional self-perception helps to the development of empathic tendency by developing the ability to take the perspectives of others and by making inferences (Bryant, 2003). The potential to make inferences based on the own feelings and own understandings of the other’s feelings and thoughts is one’s potential to have empathic tendency, a kind of social sensitivity (Dökmen, 1988). The susceptibility of empathic thinking and responding is the empathic tendency.

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doi:10.1016/j.sbspro.2009.01.361
Empathy requires the counselor’s ability and effort to place himself or herself symbolically into the position of the client and understand the client’s world. However, empathic tendency with an understanding alone is not effective (Chunk & Bemak, 2002). The counselor must have the ability and the skill to communicate and demonstrate empathic understanding. Empathy is considered to be communicated only if the client perceives and believes the counselor to be empathic. Empathic skill is an ability and a core therapeutic technique for most of the counseling approaches (Tursi & Cochran, 2006) and can be developed by education (Ikiz, 2006) and the counselor’s knowledge of counseling theories enhances empathic ability (Tursi & Cochran, 2006), as well. Empathic skill is an others-oriented response. Counselor don’t develop an emotional response based own feelings and thoughts according to the client’s sharing, on the contrary, counselor develops an “independent” response from the client’s sharings and the response has an “understanding” base (Bryant, 2003).

Being an effective counselor warrants an integration of field knowledge with techniques and skills within the personality characteristics and self-awareness of counselors (Johns, 1996). Each therapist must find the balance between self-awareness and empathy such that self-awareness enhances rather than detracts from empathy (Cochran & Cochran, 2006). The main determinator of the counseling process in order to reach the intended outcomes involving client growth is actually the therapeutic relation’s itself. The relationship is one of the most important factors in outcome variance (Tursi & Cochran, 2006). The construction of a therapeutic relation has several impacts on counselor’s growth to establish a mean for life, to cope with own stress and traumatic life events, to develop own spirituality and mental health (Jodry, 2003). Recently, cultural diversity rate is getting higher in schools, therefore, students, families and as a result, teachers have complex needs (Butler & Constantine, 2005). The increasing psychological and emotional demands of clients as well as the counselors’ feelings for not being effective to meet them may lead to burnout in counselors (Drake & Hebert, 2002) and this leads to a necessity for enhancing their capabilities on counseling skills (Ikiz, 2006). Counselors need to use a variety of skills and strategies to assist clients in changing. Given the complexity of culture, it is important to consider how one displays empathy effectively across culture (Chunk & Bemak, 2002).

Violence and aggression are particularly important antisocial behaviors which typically involves serious and extreme behavior intended to cause physical harm to another person. School-wide primary prevention activities may include teaching conflict resolution, emotional literacy and anger management skills to all students to establish positive school climate. For the individuals who are exposed to greater risk of displaying antisocial behavior, mentoring, academic support, small-group social skill instruction, and counseling should be conducted. It is obvious that students, teachers and school administrators commonly turn to counselors for assistance when violence erupts in general and when it occurs within the school setting. These practitioners are expected to provide counseling services for both the victims and the perpetrators of violent acts and to provide professional leadership to develop and implement comprehensive violence prevention initiatives in schools (D’Andrea, 2004).

To provide effective counseling service and that kind of leadership, counselors need to be aware of their capacities. Counseling self-efficacy is the beliefs of a counselor about their capabilities to effectively counsel a client (Larson & Daniels, 1998) and consists of the capability on microskills, on counseling process, on coping with difficult client behaviour, on having cultural competency and awareness of values (Yuen, et al., 2004). Counselors are humans and cultural beings, thus, counselor self-awareness in their capacities on empathic tendency and empathic ability, the variables that may affect their empathy; on their knowledge and skill integration to develop and implement school-based violence prevention programs is foundational to establish the necessary framework for school-wide policies. Daniels et al. (1999) emphasize for counselors that by remaining quiet about violence, they become guilty of passively complying with the various types of the construct. It has been expected for school counselors to routinely provide psychoeducational programs, life skills training programs, consultation, advocacy services, individual and family counseling empathically.

Actually these preventive counseling services are seen to be excellent ways to promote the mental health and psychological well-being of large numbers of youths effectively. According to all above, school counselors are seen as the keys for the prevention of conflict and violence for safe schools. If the counselors can be empathic, they will either teach these skills to their students during their everyday interactions with them, and represent the desired models for the future generations. In order to conduct school-wide preventive studies, they should empathically determine the unique needs of the cultural aspects and the clientele. Therefore, this study aims to determine the empathic ability and empathic tendency levels of the counselors in order to mention the importance of emotion control and self-efficacy of counselors to enhance school-wide prevention activities for safe schools; to mentally healthy and professionally sufficient counselor profile and to offer community-wide suggestions for counselor education.
2. Method

This research is a descriptive and a comparative study in which the samples’ existing levels on variables are determined by inventories and than they are examined according to sociodemographic variables.

Participants: The participants are randomly selected and participated voluntarily. Participants consist 128 counselors from different work places in Izmir, Turkey. The sample consists 103 women (80.5%) and 25 men (19.5%), 71 of them (55.5%) work in elementary school, 33 of them (25.7%) work in high school, 24 of them (18.8%) work in Guidance Research Center. 47 of them (36.7%) indicate they work for 5 years and 52 (40.6%) of them indicate they work between 5-10 years, 16 of the participants (%12.5) indicate they work between 11-15 years and 13 (%10.2) of them indicate that they work over 15 years. 68 of them (53.1%) are married and 60 of them (46.9%) are not, 49(38.3%) of them indicate that they have child and 79 (61.7%) of them indicate no child. 52 of them (40.6%) indicate that they found themselves efficient on empathic ability, 61 of them (47.6%) indicate that they found themselves very efficient, 15 of them (11.8%) found themselves inefficient on empathic ability.

Empathic Ability Scale: It had been developed by Dökmen (1988) for assessing the empathic understanding and responses of the participants in which they choose 4 relevant responses and one irrelevant response from 12 responses for each of the six cases. Totally 24 response get points according to their importance. When the total point is high, it means that empathic ability is high. During reliability studies, Cronbach alpha quotient was found as .83 and scale was found as valid.

Empathic Tendency Scale: It had been developed by Dökmen (1988) for assessing the empathy potential of people in daily life. It is a likert type inventory with 20 items. High score means high empathic tendency. During reliability studies, cronbach alpha quotient was found as .88 and during validity studies, with Edwards Personal Preferences Inventory, similar scale quotient was found r=.68 as valid.

Questionnaire: It was developed by the researcher in order to determine the sociodemographic characteristics of the participants, personal efficiency perceptions on their empathic ability, as well.

3. Results

There is a statistically significant difference between the participants’ empathic tendency and empathic ability mean scores according to gender (U= 952.5, p=.044); men had an average rank of 51.10 and women had an average rank of 67.75. There is no statistically significant difference between the participants’ empathic tendency and empathic ability mean scores according to age and gender however, there is a statistically significant difference between the participants’ empathic tendency and empathic ability mean scores according to having a child, (U=1427.00, p=.013) ; who indicated that they have no child had an average rank of 58.06 and who indicated having a child had an average rank of 74.88.

There is a statistically significant difference between the participants’ empathic tendency and empathic ability mean scores according to work place, is given on Table 1.
Table 1. The Effects Of Work Place On Empathic Ability and Empathic Tendency Levels

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Work Place</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Mean rank.</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>$\chi^2$</th>
<th>$p$</th>
<th>Differences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Empathic Ability</td>
<td>Elementary School</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>61.91</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.362</td>
<td>.506</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>High School</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>64.53</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Guidance Research Center</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>72.13</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empathic Tendency</td>
<td>Elementary School</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>64.46</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7.839</td>
<td>.020*</td>
<td>2-3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>High School</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>76.26</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Guidance Research Center</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>48.44</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$p < .05$

As seen on Table 1, counselors’ who work in high schools had higher empathic tendency then the counselors’ who work in Guidance Research Centers.

There is a statistically significant difference between the participants’ empathic tendency and empathic ability mean scores according to year of work ($\chi^2 = 21.18$, df=3, $p = .000$). Counsellors who work for 5 years had a mean rank of 39.78 and who works between 6-10 years had mean rank 59.24 (U = 741.50, $p = .001$); counsellors who work for 5 years had a mean rank 25.96 and who work over 15 years had a mean rank of 46.92 (U= 92.00, $p = .000$); counsellors who work between 6 -10 years had a mean rank of 37.35 and who work between 11-15 years had a mean rank of 25.25 (U = 268.00, $p = .032$); counsellors who work between 11-15 years had a mean rank of 10.78 and who work over 15 years had a mean rank of 20.19 (U = 36.50, $p = .002$).

4. Discussion and Suggestions

In this research, gender, year of working and having a child is found to be effective on empathic tendency of the participants. It can be said that women has higher empathic tendency, counsellors who work more than 5 years have higher empathic tendency and counsellors who have a child have higher empathic tendency. Age and engagement statue is not effective on both empathic ability and empathic tendency of the participants. Working place is effective, that is empathic tendency of counsellors who work in Guidance Research Centers are lower than the others. The reason is thought to be that the size of the participants are smaller than the others. According to literature, age and work year is not effective on empathic ability (Aydın, 1996; Uygun, 2006; Bostic, 2006); age, gender, engagement, having a child are not effective on empathic ability (Bayam, Simsek & Dilbaz, 1995), age is effective but gender is not effective on empathic ability (Alkaya, 2004). However, generally it was found that women had higher empathic ability scores then men (Aydın, 1996) and emotional intelligence was higher in women and had a positive relation with empathic tendency (Austin et al., 2005) and this is parallel with the results of this research.

Antisocial behavior can be a reaction to ineffective schooling and to feelings of frustration and failure (Brinson, Kottler & Fisher 2004) and student alienation has been identified as one of the key factors (Dryfoos, 1990); no single risk factor can explain who will or will not develop antisocial behavior (Van Acker, 2007). Empathic teacher enhances the attachment feelings of students to the school which results in a rise in the attachment to the friends and the teachers (Fraga, 2006). This feeling of belonging is important for maintain safe atmosphere in schools. Moreover, an individual counselor’s personality traits may have a great impact on client outcomes (Urbani et al., 2002) and personal moral character has positive relation with empathic tendency (Acun Kapikiran, 2007). This emphasizes the importance of empathy of counsellors for maintaining and restoring the students’ psychological well-being and establishing constructive responses to anger in order to avoid violence in schools.

Rogers stated that, for constructive personality change to occur, the counselor should have an empathic understanding of the client’s internal frame of reference and this must be communicated to the client to some degree. Both cognitive-behavioral and person-centered interventions help counselor’s understanding for the connection between thoughts and the resulting feelings, the power of irrational expectations, to evaluate the
accuracy of expectations and thus, more quickly understand the client’s frame of reference and communicate empathic understanding to the client. From this counselor’s ability to understand, the client was empowered to understand himself or herself better (Tursi & Cochran, 2006). Counselors should avoid believing that they know the best way for clients to handle their problems but may carefully make suggestions for actions. Skillfulness of counselor is one of the most salient variables that contributes to successful outcome. Therefore, it seems that counseling education curriculums should be reexamined and counselor educators should consider revising the methods to increase the skillfulness of the counselors. The acquisition of risk assessment skills should also begin during counselor training.

The basic courses could do more to provide conditions that allow students to grapple with more realistic counseling dilemmas. Problem solving can be facilitated by considering multiple perspectives and problem based learning can enhance the growth of counselor candidates and encourage them to wrestle with the unknown, as well.

Counselors have a significant role to play in delivering mental health care in various settings. Therefore as a mentally healthy counselor profile, a psychological model and an educator, they have to develop basic empathic skills and the risk assessment skills to conduct school-wide or community-wide prevention studies for safe schools. During in-job-trainings, they have to be supervised and supported by the academicians for maintaining their self-efficacy.

References


