

## **EMPATHIC COMMUNICATION: A NEW PARADIGM TO THE PROBLEM OF KNOWING OTHER MINDS**

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Communication forms the very basis of a society. Communication power is not the monopoly of human beings, all living beings communicate in their own specific manner. However, restricting ourselves to the human world only, it may be claimed that human relationships rest on communication. Communications can be both verbal and non-verbal. Yet one must communicate in order to express. The expression of our thoughts, feelings, ideas, emotions all require communication as their basis. In our everyday life we encounter a number of individuals each with their own characteristics. We admire some, others we tend to avoid. We seem to feel very comfortable with some person's behaviours, attitudes and thoughts; whereas, it is not so with many others. However, we all need to deal with many such people at some point of time or the other in various situations.

Now the obstacles to proper communication are numerous. Of them the most notable one seems to be the personality. Again, personality is a pregnant term. It indicates the character traits of the speaker as well as that of the listener which plays a vital role in facilitating communication. For instance, a headmaster of a school possessing an over-powering personality puts up a countenance that drives away all the students from him. A student, on the other hand, being too timid and having speech difficulties is unable to put up a complaint against a bully in her class. Thus, from the very preliminary levels of interaction, communication between two or more individuals can be impeded and impaired due to personality traits.

Personality, as already mentioned, consists of cavernous intricacies in it. It is influenced by a number of underlying factors. It involves one's environment, upbringing and exposure to the outer world which in turn determine the individual set of beliefs, value systems and their ways of perception and thinking. These then evidently produce conspicuous impacts in their style of speech and communication. Relating the famous French philosopher, anthropologist and sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's social theories in the present context, the development of individual personality and ability of communication may be attributed to one's *habitus*.

Generally speaking, *habitus* is the socially or culturally accepted or standardised forms of behaviour and understanding. *Habitus* is 'the way society

becomes deposited in persons in the form of lasting dispositions, or trained capacities and structured propensities to think, feel and act in determinant ways, which then guide them' (Wacquant 2005: 316, cited in Navarro 2006: 16)<sup>1</sup>. To make things clearer, *habitus* is not an individual process; rather it is a created social process. The *habitus* presents certain patterns or structures in the society that are enduring but are relative to context and time. Thus, *habitus* 'is not fixed or permanent, and can be changed under unexpected situations or over a long historical period' (Navarro 2006: 16)<sup>2</sup>.

The most intriguing part is that *habitus* is not created out of free will yet it is not determined by societal or cultural structures. Rather it is an interaction and inter-relation between the two endured over time. Human dispositions are influenced by past events and occurrences which again propel practices and understandings of the present and most importantly, they condition our perceptions as well. Considering thus, *habitus* is constructed and reproduced repeatedly 'without any deliberate pursuit of coherence...without any conscious concentration' (Bourdieu 1984: 170)<sup>3</sup>. Thus, context and environment are the prime influences on *habitus*. Such theory can explain the individual personality developments and can also account for the tensions and challenges that are encountered during communication.

Now keeping the above in mind, it is important to regard the fact that physical or psychological indispositions often act as impediments to proper ways of expression but personality disorders too, as distinct from psychosis, are great hindrances towards a person's ability to communicate and to maintain a functional lifestyle. Personality disorders in turn can be of varied types, each with its distinct identifying features. Yet the most notable effects of personality disorders on the individual are constricted affect and oddities of speech which further lead to distressed relationships and withdrawn lifestyle.

The most important question that poses at this juncture is that how can we communicate with such individuals. It is also essential to understand these individuals and to also make them feel that they are understandable. The most conspicuous feelings on the part of the individuals having communication difficulties due to psychosis or other personality disorders are delusional self-image, distorted perception of the surroundings and fear of not being understood by anyone which

often leads to a self-imposed seclusion. In such a state-of-affairs the foremost approach towards handling such individuals is to make them feel comfortable by understanding them and making them realise that they are understandable. Such, however, can be most effectively done by empathic communication.

Before entering into further depths of the matter it is important to take a closer look at what empathic communication is based upon. For that we need to take a quick look at how we communicate. While communicating we mostly do not listen to others with the intent to understand rather we listen with the intent to reply. We are either speaking or preparing to speak. We are filtering everything through our own paradigms, trying to relate to our own incidents or experiences which often block our understanding of the other. Empathic communication grasps this area. It emphasizes on understanding and then communicating. The intention to first understand the other involves a very deep shift in paradigm in the communication style for we typically seek first to be understood in most cases.

Now let us try to find out what empathy really means. Empathy has been defined as “a continuing process whereby the counsellor lays aside her own way of experiencing and perceiving reality, preferring to sense and respond to the experiences and perceptions of her client. This sensing may be intense and enduring with the counsellor actually experiencing her client’s thoughts and feelings as powerfully as if they had originated in herself.”<sup>4</sup>. In simpler words, empathy involves temporarily keeping aside one’s own values, beliefs etc. and stepping into the other person’s shoes in order to feel and realise that individual’s experiences and perceptions. The act of keeping aside one’s personal stances on any matter for the time being helps to get rid of the psychological blockages that often impede understanding others. Such communication pattern remarkably facilitates proper interaction between the hearer and the listener and helps to improve the clarity of mutual understanding.

Empathic communication, however, can be both verbal and non-verbal. Verbal empathy includes words, sentences etc. which genuinely recognise the client’s feelings and thoughts; whereas, the non-verbal aspect includes ways of communication, gestures, expressions and the like. An example from a clinical set-up would help to make the method clearer:

Client: I always feel that my colleagues are after me and are planning things on my back. I can't concentrate on my work. I feel suffocated.

Counsellor: I can realise what you are going through. You are feeling worried all the time. At the same time, you are feeling lonely as you cannot find anybody to confide in. That is hindering your concentration as well. [verbal empathy]

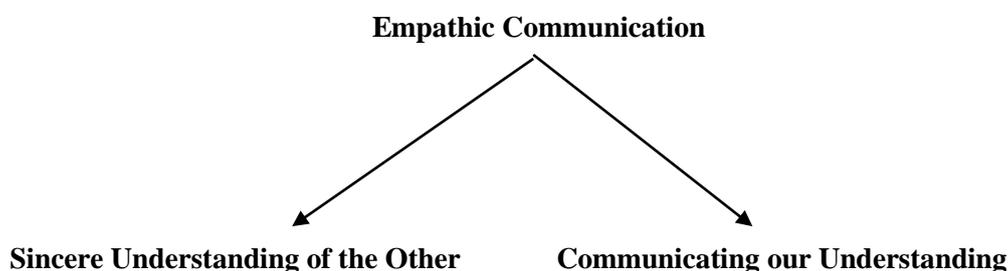
Client: I feel unwanted. I am carrying out all my duties but they are always trying to damage my work. They are hiding my important papers just when my boss would be calling me in. I feel very angry and bitter as well.

Counsellor: I understand how difficult it is for you to go through all this everyday. You feel angry as well as very sad.

Client: [*pause*] Yeah...indeed so.

The counsellor lightly touches the shoulder of the client [non-verbal empathy].

The above case shows how the empathic communication of the counsellor helps the client to confide more in him/her and gradually opens up. The client then develops a faith in the relation between them and consequently, can identify and state his problems and feelings with more clarity before the therapist. A diagram may help to clarify the exact task of empathic communication:



Now, it is very important to discuss *why* at all empathic communication is utmost necessary and one of the most efficacious modes of communication as well as therapeutic interventions. Empathy helps to communicate the listener's understanding of the speaker. This, itself, is a great boost to the person because it raises his self-esteem as he feels that at least he is understandable. It also makes him more comfortable as he realizes that the hearer is really trying to understand his feelings and difficulties. In clinical set-ups also it strengthens the client-counsellor relationship through which the client attains the faith to confide in the therapist. Thus, in other words, it dissolves alienation.

Empathy as a process has certain notable effects in therapy. One such effect is that by focusing on the client's surface and underlying feelings, the individual's personal awareness is increased. The awareness about one's own feelings and admitting their responsibilities is the initial step towards recognizing and handling their implications. For instance, a wife became aware of her feelings of anger towards her husband which was previously only being presented as continuous irritation.

The most significant outcome of empathic communication is that it provides scope to the client for deeper and more incisive self-exploration. When the counsellor paraphrases her understandings of the client's feelings and thoughts through empathic communication, the veiled emotions and ideas get revealed to the client himself through self-directed reflection. Thus, the client becomes more and more aware of his underlying states of thinking and feelings. In this context, it is noteworthy that the task of paraphrasing on the part of the counsellor is extremely effective and helpful in the sense that whenever the therapist is reflecting or reformulating the client's thought process, it implicitly poses the question, 'Is it an accurate understanding of you?'<sup>5</sup>. The client then starts to re-examine his own processes and responds. Even if the counsellor is partly correct, the client would feel encouraged to open up and engage into deeper excavations.

However, it is very important to keep in mind that the empathic paraphrasing must be open-ended. It should not be such that allows the client to respond only with a 'yes' or a 'no'. A qualified counsellor would always paraphrase in such a manner that leads the client towards further self-exploration. For instance, as we have seen in the previous case, the counsellor states that, "you feel angry"; whereas, the more effective way would have been one which involves a tentative as well as a questioning intonation, as in – "so...you feel...angry?"<sup>6</sup>.

This not only helps to check whether the counsellor has properly understood the client or not but also implicitly encourages the client to carry on with the exploration and narration which are there in his consciousness. Such process specifically focuses on the edge of awareness. Now the terms 'focussing' and 'edge of awareness' owe recognition to the invaluable contributions of Eugene T. Gendlin in understanding and effectively practising empathic communication (Gendlin, 1981, 1984, 1996)<sup>7</sup>. The most notable and efficacious point in empathic communication is

to penetrate into the underlying thinking and feelings of the client rather than dwelling on the superficial or the presenting experiences or responses which in turn have been triggered by the suppressed feelings themselves. Most often the client is unaware of the underlying responses and feels so fettered by the present experiences that even the task of trying to dig deeper into one's own thought processes appear to be extremely difficult. It is then the task of the counsellor to facilitate the client's self-exploration and self-understanding through empathic communication associated with the expression of empathic sensitivity. Empathic sensitivity may be understood as the counsellor's own emotional and intellectual sensitivity centred on the client. The excavations of the deep-seated feelings are absolutely necessary not only to relieve the client from the present sufferings but also to equip one's self in order to handle similar future occurrences. It is, however, significant to note that there may be ridges between the underlying feelings and the current states of experience. They may at times merely supplement the presenting ones. They may even be contradictory states. For instance, a client showing apparently polite acceptance of an event may be unconsciously heaving strong disagreement or disapproval of it inside. There may be other instances as well where the underlying thoughts are neither compatible nor contradictory to the superficial ones; rather they may bring forth completely new perspectives to the understanding. Like, a client complained of not being able to make decisions in any perspective. Investigations brought out that it was being triggered by a suppressed feeling of intense fear of loss. Thus, the identification of the concealed feelings and thought processes are very important to get rid of the sufferings.

At this point, it is again extremely important to keep in mind that the underlying feelings may not always be properly developed as distinct feelings. They may only be certain sensations which are indicative of particular feelings. The sensations may not be that intense, may be vague and there might be clear difficulties in expressing the sensations. They may be sensations like, 'tightness', 'blackness', 'welling up', 'falling', 'blocking' etc. Gendlin terms these as felt-sense<sup>8</sup> which lie at the interface of our known and unknown self. It is like the edge or the gateway of our self-awareness. The 'known' part constitutes the surface feelings and responses of the client to a particular event while the 'unknown' includes all that is there inside – the underlying levels, the previous associations or even the future possibilities. The

known is at the surface but the unknown cannot be traced merely by analysing the known. Thus, the focus should be on the edge of awareness, that is, on the interface between the known and the unknown – namely, the felt sense. However, on the part of the counsellor, the release of the empathic sensitivity in the process, as mentioned earlier, is very important in bringing up the deeper levels to the surface as it concentrates on the client's felt-sense. The feeling that immediately percolates in the client is the sense of being understandable; consequently, confidence builds up as the thoughts and feelings are being recognised. Thus, working of the other's mind, namely, thoughts and feelings can be traced and validated in its complete authenticity.

Now, let us take a look at certain instances of empathic communication in our everyday life and in some typical situations. However, as we have already seen in the previous excerpt from a clinical session that empathic communication involves the power of simply acknowledging the other person's thoughts and feelings. It separates acknowledging the thoughts and feelings of a person from approving, agreeing, advising or persuading. Here are two examples of acknowledgments that do not imply agreement:

Counsellor to a drug abuse client:

“I understand that you are feeling terrible right now and that you really want some drugs. But I want you to know that I'm still concerned that this stuff that you're taking is going to kill you.”

Mother to seven-year-old child:

“I know that you want some more cake and ice-cream, dear, because it tastes so good, but you've already had three pieces and I'm really worried that you'll get an upset tummy. That's why I don't want you to have any more.”

By this time it is evident to all of us that empathy is *not* sympathy. Sympathy is a form of agreement or a form of judgment. It may also be a form of discrete imposition. People under certain unstable emotive states often seek sympathy. It gives them solace temporarily *but makes them dependent*. The essence of empathic listening and communication is to fully, deeply, understand that person, *emotionally as well as intellectually*.

The following case studies would help to bring out the spirit and efficacy of empathic communication even further.

An Excerpt from a Session which emphasizes on listening:

Client: I can't understand my kid. He just won't listen to me at all.

Therapist: Let me restate what you just said, -“You don't understand your son because he won't listen to you?”

Client: That's right!

Therapist: Let me try again,-“You don't understand your son because he won't listen to you?”

Client: [*impatiently*] That's what I said!

Therapist: I thought that to understand another person, you need to listen to him.

Empathic Communication in Hostile Situations:

An experienced nurse shared an exchange she had with a doctor. The doctor had ordered a nervous line to be inserted in a patient although the nurse, noticing various symptoms indicating that it would not be medically advisable to do so, decided not to.

Doctor: [*in a demanding tone*] I ordered the line put in!

Nurse: I see you're very upset because I didn't put in the line.

Doctor: [*screaming angrily*] Who the hell do you think you are?! I gave my orders and it's not done!

Nurse: I know you're really angry with me because I didn't follow your orders about this.

Doctor: [*sternly*] Yeah, that's right. I've got so much to do and I wrote the instructions. I made it clear!

Nurse: I know you're under so much pressure, under much strain, and it's really annoying for you that I didn't put in the line. It's extra anxiety— just what you didn't need today.

Doctor: [*pacified*] That's right. How come you didn't put in the line?

The nurse explained her reasons and they engaged in calm, rational dialogue about the best course of action for the patient.

Empathic Communication in Everyday Life:

The following was reported by a client after attending a workshop on communication:

My son was in the bath and wanted to play with a particular bottle of liquid soap. I knew this soap would hurt his eyes and wouldn't allow it. In the past this sort of scene would lead to an escalation of anger, affecting us, and the household, for at least a full day if not longer. Earlier our communication pattern would have been like

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'No, you can't have it!'

'I want it!'

'I said NO! Put it down!'

This time I thought I'll use the skills we learned that day in the workshop.

'You're really angry at mummy for not letting you play with that soap!'

'Yes, I want it!'

'I know you really wish you could have that bottle, and you're mad at me because I won't let you.'

'That's right. I am.'

I couldn't believe it. After about a minute the episode was over. His anger was gone, and we enjoyed each other's company.

It is, thus, evident from all the above instances that how the acknowledgement of the others' feelings helps to diffuse anger, mistrust etc. even in situations where there is disagreement, and at the same time it creates space for healthy, rational communication.

On reaching upon the terminal part of our discussion, we find that communication rests on the fact that we all want to be both understood and acknowledged on one hand, and to be approved of and agreed with, on the other. With practice, it is possible to first respond with a simple acknowledgment. As we do this we would find that our conversation partners are more likely to acknowledge our position and experience, even if they don't agree. Such mutual acknowledgment can create an atmosphere in which it is easier to work towards agreement or accommodate disagreements more gracefully. Empathic communication leaves us with the option of agreeing or disagreeing with the other person's point of view, actions or way of experiencing. It leaves us with the option of saying yes or no to a demand or request. It also leaves us with the option of saying more about the matter. Thus, it may be convincingly claimed that empathic communication style when

adopted and practiced in our everyday conversations, - be it our formal conversations or even our personal and intimate ones bring forth bidirectional efficacies. Communicating in an empathic way not only makes our understanding of our near and dear ones better; it makes them feel closer and more understandable to us too. The person, on the other hand, practising such modes of communication feels empowered and can handle stress situations with enhanced expertise. The reason behind it is that one can understand one's own merits and limitations and respond accordingly. The awareness of one's deeper self is enhanced that reveals the individual to one's own self with more clarity. Knowing one's self is undoubtedly the empowerment most sought for and increased self-understanding facilitates better understanding of the other minds. Most importantly, empathic communication makes room for verifying our understanding of the other by the person herself. The moot issue, as we all know, with regard to knowing the other minds is that whether our understanding is through inference or not. That in turn challenges the authenticity of our understandings. However, through empathic communication knowing the other minds turns out to be absolutely authentic as it is a direct process not involving inferential means and the like and each understanding being verified by the person himself/herself. Thus, empathy helps us to know and understand each other and effectively helps to build better and sincere relationships.

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