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Empathy's Importance in Social Work Practices

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Abstract

Social work that aims social change by increasing the functionality of individuals is a profession aiming to develop continuous human wellness, like other similar disciplines. Change is necessary for this progress and its continuity. As an agent of social change, social workers must possess some qualities. Social worker is a member of profession; who can take responsibility, respect differences and consider them, able to think critically, able to use verbal and non-verbal communication skills and able to develop empathy. Social workers who possesses those qualities can start the social aid relation. Therapeutic communication is accepted as one of the most important techniques in various researches to date. And empathy is one of the main instruments of Therapeutic communication. By definition, empathy is the capacity to recognize emotions that are being experienced by another person. For this research that emphasizes the importance of empathy, a trusted Turkish version of "empathy scale" is applied to 295 social workers, who are randomly selected from the members Turkish Social Work Association. The results suggest that female social workers possess more emphatic skills than their male counterparts. This research also suggest that post graduate vocational education, increased working time and age also contributes to increase the emphatic skills of social workers. Those results demonstrate the importance of empathy in social work area as well as the possibility of developing this concept. This research also makes some suggestions to social workers, relevant associations and to social work academicians.

Keywords: Empathy, Social Work, Social Worker.

Introduction

Every human being is a part of society and all humans are social beings that interact with other people and show continuous progress. This progress contributes to the creation of their personalities. The social norms and values play a big role during this process. Learning to respect to others' perspectives and thoughts is also a part of this process. New communication skills will bring richness and respect to a person and his/her environment as well as enable healthy interpersonal relations. (Cüceloğlu, 1993)

The social work that aims social change by increasing the functionality of individuals is a profession aiming to develop continuous human wellness, like other similar disciplines. Change is necessary for this progress and its continuity. As an agent of social change, social workers must possess some qualities. Social worker is a member of profession; who can take responsibility, respect differences and consider them, able to think critically, able to use verbal and non-verbal communication skills and able to develop empathy. Social workers who possess those qualities can start the social aid relation.

Because of personal differences, the effects of environmental conditions and systems people live in change from person to person. These conditions, systems and other developmental features may sometimes lead to some problems. Where some are able to overcome those problems, others may need professional support. Social worker can act as a counselor in such a relationship. Social worker must be able to put him/herself in applicant's position and must be able to approach to his/her problems in a professional manner. In other words social worker must be able to behave emphatically. Empathy by definition is the capacity to correctly recognize emotions that are being experienced by another person. While using this technique, social worker uses the perspective of the applicant and tries to look at the problem from the applicant's world. Of course, in order to do this social worker must know the world of the applicant. In other words, social worker must know and recognize the environmental factors in which the applicant lives. And social worker must also be able to return to his/her role after being in the role of the applicant. Social worker must not resemble the applicant, must not be identified with the applicant, must not sympathize and justify the applicant. By this technique social worker will be able to better understand the feelings and thoughts of the applicant.

Carl Rogers is the first person who comes to mind when we mention "empathy". Rogers is known regarding his studies on empathy and communication.

Empathy which is defined by Carl Rogers as "living the life of the applicant temporarily"; includes the ability of therapist to convey his new point of view to the issues which haunt the applicant.

Rogers, says he reached the following facts as a result of his studies:

- And ideal therapist is first and foremost is empathic.
- Empathy is related to self-expression and continuation of the process.

- The empathy at the onset of relationship defines the level of success later on.
- In a successful therapy, the applicant faces great deal of empathy.
- Emphatic understanding is provided by the therapist but not provided by the applicant.
- More experienced the therapist is more empathic he/she is.
- Empathy is a special situation during a therapy and therapists are more emphatic than a caring friend.
- Therapists who possess a stronger personal integrity are able to behave more emphatically.
- Experienced therapist may not behave emphatically most of the time.
- Applicants are able to better evaluate the level of empathy rather than the therapists.
- Being smart and diagnostic perception is not relative to empathy.
- Emphatic existence can be learned from emphatic people.   (Rogers, 1975)

According to Batson and his friends (1987) there are 3 phases of definitions of empathy during the history.

Until the end of 1950's, empathy is approached as a cognitive concept. During this period, peoples' perception of mutual individual qualities is measured as "scale of empathy". During 1960's the emotional aspect of empathy gained importance besides its cognitive aspect. During those years, the ability of a person to feel like the other person is accepted as empathy. 1970's brought the final phase: The ability to understand a certain feeling of a person and conveying this situation to that person is called empathy.

Approaches about Empathy

Egocentrism is not compatible with emphatic behavior. It's impossible for an egocentric person to assume the role of the other person, to look at events from the eyes of another, i.e. to behave emphatically. Getting rid of egocentrism is a precondition to form empathy. (Dökmen, 2011)

The notion of egocentrism is first used by Piaget. Piaget noted that children behave egocentric during their ages when they can't think in an abstract way. Piaget mentioned 3 kinds of egocentrism which are visual/spatial egocentrism, cognitive egocentrism and emotional egocentrism. He noted that those people have difficulties to behave emphatically to other people and objects.

The notion of empathy created interest in psychology, psychiatry and similar disciplines during the last century. Every discipline brought in new definitions to this concept and adapted it according to their own knowledge and values.

The meeting of social work with empathy go back a long way. Rogers (1975) admits he learned the most efficient ways of emphatic approach from a social worker. Rogers says, thanks to this social worker, he learned to separate the feelings of an applicant from his/her words. And also learned that the most

effective reaction is to reflect back the feelings of the applicant back to him/her. Rogers said that this knowledge enabled him to accelerate his studies and improve the concept of empathy. As seen in this example, the concept of empathy exists in the social worker-applicant relationship, since the years when empathy began to gain importance.

During the 20th century the concept of empathy got totally embedded into the social work of when social work developed into a real profession. It's been frequently emphasized to social workers that a social worker must develop a warm, intimate attitude to an applicant while working with them. (Tuncay ve İl, 2009) Because social work is a profession which serves people, uses face to face techniques and accept the aid relationship as professional liability, like other professions who are related to empathy.

Various researches show that empathy is an important tool for a positive therapeutic intervention. (Watson, 2002) Thanks to empathy that possesses a therapeutic potential, a social worker is able to behave in a calm and appreciative approach to his/her applicant. And this weakens the break off phenomenon of the applicant thus strengthening the process of problem solving. (Nerdrum, 1997; Straussner and Phillips, 2005; Rasoal and friends. 2009; Tuncay ve İl, 2009)

In addition to all those, empathy does have some other goals. According to Turan (2009) social worker can use emphatic communication for the purposes below:

- To accurately assess the problems of the applicant (The amount of attention enables the applicant to give accurate and detailed information about his/her problem)
- To answer the non-verbal messages (mimics, body movements, tone of voice) of the applicant,
- To make the applicant realize the realities about his/her life more easily,
- To remove difficulties that arise from the behaviors of the applicant,
- To control the negative feelings and behavior of the applicant such as rage and aggression. (Those may be the result of feelings such as desperation and disappointment as well as environmental education which shows aggression to cope with various difficulties)

As a result of emphatic communication, applicant doesn't need to defend him/herself against the therapist and becomes ready to change his/her behavior. It's also necessary to know the importance and purpose of those feelings put forward by the applicant. Non-verbal messages such as crying silence, stuttering, change in the tone of voice, grinding teeth; changing sitting style shows the existence of some disturbing feelings.

Various studies regarding the place of empathy in social work clearly points out to the importance of empathy. It's of paramount importance for a social worker to use empathy who wants to understand the applicant better,

who wants to positively develop and sustain the aid relationship and who wants to reach the best solution via the shortest route.

Method

Participants

An announcement was made to the registered members of Social Worker Association and 295 social workers were selected by random sampling from the volunteers for this study.

Measures

In order to collect data for this study a twofold questionnaire is used. In the first part, an interview form is applied to determine the socio-demographic characteristics of social workers. In the second part, an "empathy scale" is used, which is developed by King and Holosko (2012), which is translated in to Turkish and verified.

A "Personal Information Questionnaire" is prepared to determine the socio-demographic features of social workers that are thought to be related to their emphatic abilities. This "Personal Information Questionnaire" is consisted of questions regarding their home city, occupation, duration of occupation, gender, age, graduation, area of expertise, average number of served applicants per day and studies or schools attended in addition to their undergraduate study, if any.

Empathy Scale for Social Workers

In the second part of this research, "Empathy Scale For Social Workers" which is developed by King and Holosko (2012) is used. This measurement is designed to assess the structural nature of empathy among social worker. A social work model is developed in this measurement. According to this model, King and Holosko (2012) pointed out to 3 dimensions of empathy in the practice of social work: Emotional, Cognitive and Behavioral dimensions. Each dimension each have two sub-structures. Emotional dimension consists of Caring and Congruence; Cognitive dimension has Perspective and Interpersonal Sensitivity and Behavioral dimension has Altruism and Therapeutic Relationship sub-structures.

In order to obtain research data, questionnaires that are applied to 295 social workers are assessed, with their validity and reliability analyzed. Necessary arrangements are made according to analysis results and research is continued with active questions.

The original form of "Empathy Scale for Social Workers" scale consists 41 items. Answers given to sentences typed Likert were scored used "Varimax Analysis Technique" for validity and items with factor loadings of 0.30 or higher were retained.

In order to test the reliability of the questionnaire was calculated "Cronbach Alpha" as inner consistency coefficient (,885). Reliability of the measure was assessed with the use of coefficient alpha.

Findings

In this part of the research, findings regarding socio-demographic features of social worker and their emphatic abilities are mentioned. As well as, the relationship between their emphatic abilities and socio-demographic features, t-test, ANOVA results and standard deviations are referred.

52% of social workers who took part in this research are females, 47,5% are males.

More than half of social workers who took part in this study (54,9%) didn't take any extra education after completing their under graduate schools. 15,3% continued post graduate or doctorate programs. After completing under graduate schools, 13,6% of participants studied in the field of family, 2,4% of them in social works in case of natural disasters, 1,7% on children, 1,4% of them social works and, 1,4% of them studied about women.

70,8% of social works who participated in this research are working in this field 10 years or less. 19,3% of them worked for 11-20 years, 9,2% of them worked for 21-30 years. 0,7% worked for more than 31 years.

More than half of participants (55,9%) are aged between 22-30. 28,5% of them are between 31-40, 13,9% of them between 41-50 and 1,7% are 51 and older.

Nearly half of participants (44,1%) are working in the medical social work field. 22% percent of those are working on children, 9,5% of them on family, 8,5% on handicapped people, 5,4% on elders, 2,7% on judicial social work, 2,7% women, 2,4% of them on social works in case of natural disasters.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study aims to research the effect socio-demographic variables of social workers such as gender, age, time of occupation, number of applicants met daily, post graduate studies on their emphatic abilities.

In the second part of this study, King and Holosko's "Empathy Scale For Social Workers" (2009) which is adapted to Turkish by the researcher is used. The original scale is consisted of 41 articles. After the reliability and validity study this number is reduced to 27. The highest possible empathy score of this scale is 210. The lowest score is 134 and highest is 188 (M=159, SD=9,23) in King and Holosko's scale. (2009) In this scale Cronbach is =,83.

In our adaptation which is applied on 295 social workers lowest empathy score is 125, highest is 197. In this scale Cronbach Alpha is ,885.

Results also show that women's empathy point average (163,68) is higher than men's (162,44) in our empathy scale. Some other studies also show that

women are more emphatic than men. (Otero and Luengo, 1989; Duru, 2002; Austin and friends 2005; Rueckert and Naybar, 2008; Garaigordobil and Garcia de Galdeano, 2006; Litvack and friends, 1997). Some studies also indicate that women behave more emphatic in case of "Emotional Empathy" while man behaved more emphatic in case of "Cognitive Empathy". (Garaigordobil, 2009)

The findings also indicate that, elder the social workers, more emphatic they are. It can be asserted that getting older and working in social work field increases a person's emphatic abilities. Some studies also indicate that professions where face to face communication is more common, employees behave more emphatic. (Bayram and frinends, 1995; Aydın, 1996; Uygun, 2006; Mlcak and Zaskodna, 2008; İkiz, 2009; Pedersen, 2009; akt. Tuncal ve İl, 2009) Same can be told for social workers.

Social workers, who focus on "academic" studies scores significantly higher than others on the empathy scale. This might be related to high number of materials that are read during "academic" studies and post-graduate education. In fact, in our study, the highest score belongs to a social workers who works on the academic aspect of this field. And among those the highest score belongs to social workers who focused on "women" during their postgraduate education.

On the other hand, social workers who did not attend a postgraduate education scored the lowest points on our empathy scale. This shows the positive effect of postgraduate education on emphatic abilities. Some other research also points out to the positive effect of education on increasing emphatic abilities. (Salmon, 2003; Dereboy and friends, 2005; Mete ve Gerçek, 2005; Tarrant and friends, 2009; akt. Tuncay ve İl, 2009).

There's been an increase in emphatic abilities of students who attend to "Interview in Social Work" class according to Erkan and Duyan (2000)

"Empathy In The Context of Compassion" as a subscale is observed to have a meaningful difference regarding the gender variable. Those findings indicate that female social workers create more compassionate empathy when compared to their male counterparts.

Social work profession is a discipline aiming to benefit the applicants most effectively by using face to face communication. From this angle, social work is an aid profession. And social workers are the agents of social change that are expected to use effective communication skills who are educated towards this end.

Introduction to Social Work, Introduction to Psychology, Human Behaviors and Social Environment, Social Problems, Social Work in Theory and Practice, Human Rights and Social Work, Social Work with Family and Children, Social Work with Handicapped, Social Work Ethics, Principles and Responsibilities, Medical and Psychiatric Social Work, Guilt and Social Work, Social Work Practices… Social workers who took those classes are expected to be given necessary education regarding human behavior, medical, judicial and old age problems and problems about family and children for them to come up with solutions.

The basic method for the solution of those problems is communication. A social worker must be able to use communication as a therapeutic tool in order to help their applicants. As an effective means of communication with proven therapeutic effect, empathy must be ranked higher in social work practices. A social worker who uses empathy is able to start a relationship with the applicant based on trust. A social worker, who creates an emphatic bond with the applicant, gives messages such as, "I understand you", "I can understand your problem", "I care about your thoughts and feelings", "You can trust me", "I'm the person you are looking for". This big step in such an aid relationship shows the paramount importance of empathy for social work. That's why it's important to improve empathy skills of social workers during their education at school and on-the-job training activities.

Special classes about increasing emphatic skills must be opened in social work schools; on-the-job training activities must give students an emphatic perspective; new studies must be made on the concept of empathy in social work field for social workers to help their applicant effectively.

Functional meetings must be convened for social work to develop their communicative and emphatic skills, in which they'll be able to discuss various cases.

Various seminars and conferences focusing on the importance of empathy must be convened by the contribution of social work associations and social work academicians.

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Appendix 1

The Last Version of the Empathy Scale for Social Workers

	Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
1. I try to let my clients know I am concerned for their welfare.					
2. Facial expressions say a lot about what a client is feeling.					
3. I enjoy helping people.					
4. I can tell by a client's body language if they are upset.					
5. I feel compassion for my clients.					
6. Knowing a client's personal situation is important if I am really going to help them.					
7. I can disagree with a client and still appreciate their position.					
8. I enjoy helping people even when I am not at work.					
9. Helping clients is rewarding in and of itself.					
10. Understanding a client's background makes me more helpful.					
11. My relationship with a client can help them overcome their problems.					
12. It is important for my clients to be able to trust me.					
13. It can be helpful for clients to use our relationship to practice new interpersonal skills.					
14. Clients perceive me as having more power than they do.					
15. It is important for my clients to know that I care about them.					
16. An unbiased approach is helpful to clients.					
17. The personal dynamics of my relationship with a client are beneficial to the treatment process.					
18. I pay close attention when a client's tone of voice changes.					
19. My relationship with a client can be therapeutic in and of itself.					
20. I try to give my clients a warm greeting when meeting them.					
21. I try to take a client's cultural context into account when working with them.					
22. I try to understand a client's viewpoint before making suggestions.					
23. I am attentive to my clients' non-verbal cues.					
24. I carefully consider the ways that social gender role expectations affect my clients.					
25. I am kind to my clients.					
26. I am a socially responsible person.					
27. If a client cannot afford treatment I try to find a way for them to receive the help they need.					