

Reciprocal Empathy: A Study of Student-Teacher Interaction

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It may be hypothesized that one of the important factors in the achievement of educational goals is the extent to which students and instructors are able to predict, or to project themselves into, the responses of each other. The process being referred to here has been variously described as the ability of an individual to take the role of another person or to "put himself in the other fellow's psychological shoes." This ability will be denoted by the term empathy in this paper, and will be defined following an operational definition originally proposed by Remmers (1). This operational definition consists of "having the subject or subjects predict the ordinal or cardinal position of another individual or group on one or more scales of defined psychological dimensions." In the same paper by Remmers (1), a technique for the measurement of reciprocal empathy was outlined. This technique involves having two or more individuals or groups measured as themselves on some psychological measuring instrument, and then requesting them to predict the responses of each other. The method used in the present study is based essentially on this technique.

The purpose of this investigation was to measure the ability of instructors and their students to empathize with each other, and to study possible correlates of reciprocal empathy in the classroom.

PROCEDURE

The sample employed in this study was composed of 89 instructors from a large midwestern university and the 3150 students in their classes. The typical instructor in this sample was 33 years of age, had been teaching for approximately five years, was an assistant professor, and had 31 students in his class. Participation in the study was on a voluntary basis. The sample is, therefore, a self-selected one and may not be representative of all university instructors.

The measuring instrument selected for this study was the Purdue Rating Scale for Instruction (2). This scale has been subjected to careful analysis over a period of years and is a well standardized psychological instrument. It consists of 26 traits, each one graphically scaled and defined by suitable phrases. The first ten traits are concerned primarily with instructor characteristics, while items 11-26 deal mostly with features of the course.

Two copies of the rating scale, together with detailed instructions for completing them, were distributed to each instructor and to each student in his class. Each student was requested to rate his instructor using the first copy of the rating scale. The instructor was requested to predict, on an identical rating scale, the average or typical rating he would receive from his students. The instructor was further requested to rate himself on a second copy of the rating scale. Finally, using their second copy of the rating scale, the students were requested to predict the instructor's self-rating. In summary, the following four measurements were obtained for each class by means of the Purdue Rating Scale for Instruction:

1. The students' rating of the instructor.
2. The instructors' prediction of the mean of these ratings.
3. The instructor's self-rating.
4. The students' predictions of the instructor's self-rating.

A quantitative index of the empathic ability of an instructor may be derived from these measurements by computing and summing the dif-

ference between the students' ratings of the instructor and the latter's estimates of these ratings for the 26 traits on the scale. For example, if an instructor received a mean rating of six from his students on a ten-point scale, and he predicted a mean rating of nine, his Empathy Index for that trait would be three. An analogous procedure is followed in computing an Empathy Index for the students. It will be noted that the magnitude of the Empathy Index is inversely related to empathic ability.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The first step in the analysis of the results was to compare and to study the relationship between the instructors' and students' Empathy Indices. These results are presented in Table I.

TABLE I
Comparison of Students' and Instructor's Empathic Ability

	MEAN	S.D.	r	t
Students' Empathy Index	21.6	6.1	.46**	4.83**
Instructors' Empathy Index	25.8	9.1		

** Significant at the 1% level.

The difference between the mean of the students' Empathy Index of 21.6 and the mean of the Instructors' Empathy Index of 25.8 is statistically significant at the one per cent level of confidence. The direction of the difference is in favor of the students. That is, the students are able to empathize better with their instructors than the instructors can empathize with their students. The correlation coefficient of .46 between the students' and instructors' Empathy Indices is statistically reliable, and suggests that an instructor finds it easier to empathize with a group of students who can empathize with him than with a group who cannot do so. The converse is, of course, also true. The students find it easier to empathize with an instructor who can empathize with them than with an instructor who fails to empathize with them.

The question of possible correlates of reciprocal empathy in the classroom led to an analysis of the relationships between the students' and instructors' Empathy Indices and various characteristics of the instructor and the class. These results are presented in Table II.

TABLE II
Variables Related to Empathy Indices.

VARIABLE	EMPATHY INDEX	
	STUDENT	TEACHER
	r	r
Years of teaching experience	.36**	.41**
University rank†	.42**	.50**
Number of students in class	-.20	-.32**

First, it may be noted that there is a moderate inverse relationship between an instructor's empathic ability and his teaching experience. Evidently the ability to empathize with students tends to decrease as an instructor gains teaching experience. Further, there is a tendency for

** Significant at the 1% level.

† University ranks were weighted as follows: 1. graduate assistants; 2. instructors; 3. assistant professors; 4. associate professors; 5. full professors.

the students to find it somewhat easier to empathize with an inexperienced instructor than with an experienced one. Perhaps the explanation of this finding is the similarity of the groups. The inexperienced teacher of today was usually the student of yesterday. He understands the students because being a student is a role he has recently played. This commonality of attitudes, interests, and needs probably also explains why the students find it easier to empathize with inexperienced teachers. This same pattern is reflected in the negative relationships between the rank of an instructor and empathic ability. Graduate assistants who are teaching, empathize better with their students than do full professors. And the students find it easier to empathize with teachers who are graduate assistants than with those who are full professors. These findings are consistent with the results found between teaching experience and empathic ability, since rank and teaching experience are obviously related to each other.

Finally, there is a statistically significant, though small, inverse relationship between an instructor's empathic ability and the number of students in his class. An instructor finds it easier to empathize with a large class than with a small one. But the size of the class is unrelated to the student's empathic ability. Both of these findings are contrary to what was hypothesized. It would seem that small classes would be conducive to the development of an atmosphere of reciprocal empathy. One possible explanation of these findings is that it is easier to predict an "average" of a large group than a small one, since the latter is more likely to be extreme and unstable. This is a problem that may interest future investigators of so-called "massempathy"; the ability of an individual to predict the average or typical response of a large group of individuals.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The ability of 89 university instructors and their students to empathize with each other was studied via measurements obtained on the Purdue Rating Scale for Instruction. Under the conditions of the study the following conclusions seem justified:

1. The empathic ability of an instructor and the empathic ability of his students are a function of each other.
2. Of the two groups, instructors and students, the students are the better empathizers.
3. There is a slight to moderate negative relationship between teaching experience and empathy, as well as instructor's rank and empathy.
4. The size of the class is positively related to the instructor's empathic ability, but unrelated to the students' empathic ability.

LITERATURE CITED

1. REMMERS, H. H. 1950. A quantitative index of social-psychological empathy. *Am. J. Orthopsychiat.* 20:161-165.
2. REMMERS, H. H., AND P. C. BAKER. Manual of instruction for the Purdue rating scale for instruction: 1951. Lafayette, Indiana: Division of Educ. Reference, Purdue University.