

Marjorie L. Rand, Ph.D.
616 No. Poinsettia Avenue
Manhattan Beach, CA 90266
Phone & Fax: (310) 937-0053

SOMATIC RESONANCE AND EMPATHY

Empathy was a term used by Heinz Kohut in the late 60's and early 70's, as he began to form his theories of Self Psychology. Although it took more than a decade to do so, he eventually broke away from the theories of classical psychoanalysis, largely because of his theories of empathy and mirroring as psychotherapeutic techniques. As many other theorists had done in the past when they modified psychoanalysis (Jung, Reich, Klein, Rank, etc), his theories were not at first accepted in the psychoanalytic community.

Empathy was seen as "taking care of" the patient, coddling the patient, meeting the patient's demands, colluding with the patient and "being soft" on the patient. Nothing could be further from the truth. But it takes a sophisticated understanding of the term to define it properly.

Kohut first defined empathy as "vicarious introspection" (that sounds remarkably similar to somatic resonance). Later, he also defined it as a way of listening, a stance of inquiry, a mode of observation, which he considered to be neutral. Many people confused Kohut's empathic therapeutic milieu with the "unconditional positive regard" of Carl Rogers. However, Rogers' "active listening" more resembled Kohut's mirroring.

What Kohut discovered was that psychoanalysis didn't seem to help people who had pre-oedipal trauma (before 3 years of age). Since the psychopathology of the second half of the twentieth century is narcissistic personality disorder, not neurosis (as in Freud's time), patients could not take in or respond to interpretation, confrontation, explanation, etc. He found that when he could understand what the client was expressing and reflect that understanding through the technique of accurate mirroring, they would feel seen, heard and understood by him. This then, led to their ability to later accept outside information from the therapist.

Empathy and mirroring by the parent is something an infant requires during the first three years of life in order to develop a coherent sense of self. If we are not understood and are improperly mirrored (perhaps by reflecting the needs of the parent, rather than those of the infant, the child will develop what Winnicott called the "false self". So empathy and mirroring are required to address these early developmental deficiencies.

Empathy is essential to the development of the human being. Lack of empathy produces a feeling in the child of not being human. I believe this injury is what we see in attachment disorder, and causes later acts of violence and crime, which are so prevalent in our society today.

Loss of the empathic surround (loss of any understanding) is the worst

injury and causes the most suffering in later life. This is so, because the child looks into an empty mirror. And emptiness (loss of human contact), to an infant is devastating. The astronauts of Apollo 13, chose to return to earth and risk burning up in the Earth's atmosphere, rather than circle endlessly in empty space.

Being empathic as a therapist requires clarity, boundaries, maturity, trust, confidence and compassion. It also requires that the therapist have a well defined separate self, since empathy is impossible through merger. So the belief that empathy requires merger is radically opposed to the truth.

The concepts of somatic resonance (being in your own body), and countertransference (knowing the difference between what is yours and what is the other's) are directly related to the therapeutic stance of empathy and the therapeutic skill of mirroring.

Questions or comments may be directed to Dr. Rand at Ph.D. PH/fax # 310-937-0053. E mail dr.m.rand@verizon.net