

Empathic Patterns in Complex Discourse

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Successful functioning at organizational settings in a complex, shifting and vague era, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, requires soft skills. The present study attempts to contribute to the existing body of knowledge on empathy - an essential 21st century soft skill - by honing on the explicit and expressive aspects of empathic competencies. In accordance with our aim to identify, transcribe and demonstrate empathic patterns in complex interactions in the field of education, we conducted a collaborative qualitative analysis of videotaped simulations of emotionally charged interactions, which occur in school and other educational settings. This led to the development of the Empathic Patterns in Interpersonal Communication (EPIC) conceptual model addressing cognitive, emotional and behavioral elements of empathy. The importance of EPIC, which represents an initial step in conceptualizing empathic patterns, is that it could be implemented as a practical tool that encourages effective communication among students and teachers.

Keywords: empathic competencies, emotionally charged interaction, simulation, professional development, soft skills

INTRODUCTION

The knowledge of the ‘future citizen’ is a subject addressed by many policy documents published by international organizations (OECD, 2019; European Commission, 2019; P21, 2019). Specifically, in the Covid-19 reality (Ng et. al, 2020) and generally, in what is known as the VUCA age - characterized by volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity - it is very challenging to predict the expertise that will be relevant to humanity in the next decade (Millar et al., 2018). However, one can conceive of the skills and abilities citizens and workers will need in order to function in situations they are likely to be confronted with owing to this reality. The ability to react effectively in complex and uncertain settings, to think critically, to solve ill-defined problems creatively, to express oneself clearly and precisely, alongside

intellectual modesty and a sense of curiosity, are undoubtedly some of the essential intellectual skills for the 21st century (Trilling & Fadel, 2009). However, successful functioning in a complex, shifting and vague arena requires, in addition to all these, a supplementary set of tools, known in the research literature as soft skills (Cinque, 2016; Dolce et al., 2020).

Soft skills that are essential for individual success and in organizational settings (Sigmar, Hynes, & Hill, 2012), refer to a range of intrapersonal abilities, such as determination, perseverance and resilience, alongside interpersonal functions, such as the ability to establish good relationships with others and collaborate with people different from you. The commonly-held view regarding soft skills is that they develop intuitively or spontaneously, without the need for deliberate explicit instruction (John, 2009). In this paper we challenge this perception. Cultivating empathy, as an example of an essential 21st century soft skill (Ananiadou & Claro, 2009), requires focused attention on various aspects of theoretical and practical knowledge. Review of the literature reveals a rich inventory of theoretical knowledge addressing empathy (Anderson & Dacher, 2002; Cooper, 2010; Erera, 1997; Hoffman, 2000; Katz, 1963; Shady & Larson, 2010; Siregar et al., 2019; Rosenheim, 1992; Weinberger & Bakshy, 2015) and a relative scarcity of empirical examples of practical knowledge in the field (Berkovich, 2020; Englander, 2019; Kumano et al., 2015; Walker & Legg, 2018). The present paper addresses the lack of practical knowledge about empathy as an acquired and nurtured soft skill and seeks to contribute to the existing professional literature by adding a tier of explicit and expressive aspects of empathic gestures. Following Kastbergs' and her colleagues (2020) recommendation to higher education institutes to enhance students' soft skills for lifelong success in the workplace, the current study focuses on empathic behavior patterns in teacher education.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Acting in Complicated Settings

Creating a significant impact in educational organizations demands that professional teachers deal with complicated, real-world problems. These problems refer to ill structured, emotionally charged or controversial situations in which all the elements involved may not be known, may have unclear goals, or possess multiple solutions and sometimes, no solutions at all (Sadler & Zeidler, 2004). Such uncertain realities, require practitioners who can diagnose and manage critical situations, exercise good judgment, choose among alternatives, and continually learn from their own and others' experiences. By collecting case-specific information and interpreting it, teachers, can reduce the uncertainty (Heitzmann et al., 2019) and cultivate the skills required to perform in situations of ambiguity. This includes, for example, diagnosing learning difficulties, identifying the cause of controversy or understanding the other's perspective.

This implies that teacher education programs should develop student teachers' abilities to observe while paying attention to details and to listen attentively without being constrained by preconceived notions and social stereotypes. In other words, to train the mind, the eye and the spirit simultaneously (Janesick, 2015), to analyse the characteristics of complex educational reality and to develop practices and competencies, which are required to promote future teachers' educational goals in their workplace (Osberg & Biesta, 2010).

Nurturing Soft Competencies

Before proceeding further, the term 'soft skills' requires explication. Soft skills have also been referred to as social skills, social competencies, generic competencies, and even basic life skills (Cinque, 2016). This is probably the reason why Page and Knight (2007) have defined them as 'wicked competences,' being difficult to define - they can assume different forms in different contexts and keep on developing all through an entire lifetime. Indeed, soft skills include not only interpersonal skills but meta-competencies as well, i.e., the capacity to work on competencies, to reframe and transfer them from one field to another, even from informal to formal learning.

The word, 'skill', is usually used to designate the ability to use one's knowledge with relative ease to perform relatively simple tasks. Since, as mentioned above, soft skills refer to the ability to meet demands

of a high degree of complexity, the word *competence* better represents the dynamic combination of knowledge, understanding, skills and abilities in this context (Rychen & Salganik, 2000). In addition, competence is described in terms of *responsibility* and *autonomy* while skills are described as *cognitive* or *practical* functioning. This is the reasoning behind our choice of the term ‘soft competencies’ to describe the abilities that are relevant to teachers’ empathic patterns of action.

Soft competences are essential for the personal development of future citizens, their social participation and ability to deal with global problems as well as for their success in organizations, when entering the workplace. This is the main reason why it is necessary to teach student teachers not only to think critically, but to become knowledgeable and empathic (Nussbaum, 1997) as well, equipping them with the tools they need to flourish as well-rounded human beings (Noddings, 2002). Furthermore, there is evidence that interventions which have addressed these competences increased teacher students’ academic performance and improved classroom behavior, and consequently, bettered their chances of workplace success (Schwartz et al., 2020).

Our study focuses on a set of soft competencies that are relevant to empathic behavior, since empathy is considered a key component in promoting good relationships and fruitful interactions at home, in the school, the community, and globally (Weinberger, 2017b).

Empathy in the Service of Interpersonal Communication

Empathy is defined as the ability to see the world from the perspective of the other (Tolmacz, 2008), including the talent to identify and understand the state and emotions of another person (Miller & Wallis 2011). In fact, it is far beyond a skill or competence, it is a state of mind. Empathic people are involved in a constant process of being sensitive, moment by moment, to the changing meanings felt by the other person, what he or she feels and is experiencing (Weinberger & Bakshy, 2015). Dymond formulated it elegantly: ‘The imaginative transposing of oneself into the thinking, feeling, and acting of another, and so structuring the world as he does’ (in Marwell 1964, p.87). There is empirical evidence that when people are involved in a meaningful interaction, their brains are in a state of neural coupling. Speakers and listeners exhibiting similar brain activity patterns during human linguistic interaction is correlated with communicative success (Dikker et al., 2014; Niedenthal, 2007). Thus, empathy is also regarded as emotional contagion, realized through behavioral mimicry and feedback (Hatfield et al., 2011).

When an individual feels that another person is truly interested in his or her unique inner world, foundations for dual and significant interactions are built between the two (Tettegah & Anderson 2007). When education professionals are able to take an empathic stance, empathy becomes a powerful force for change and growth of all the parties involved in complex and emotionally charged situations.

Berkovich (2020) in a recent study proposes four conceptualizations for empathy, from educational perspective: empathy as a trait, empathy as a state, empathy as communication, and empathy as a relationship. Empathy as communication is defined as a conversational interaction in which teachers use effective communication skills to transmit verbal and/or non-verbal messages of responsiveness, which are received and processed by the other party. At the present study we focus on this aspect of empathic interaction, with the attempt to conceptualize it.

From a practical perspective, empathy is a multi-dimensional concept that encompasses both affective and cognitive facets (Devoldre et al., 2010; Hall & Schwartz, 2018; Hawk et al., 2011; Tettegah & Anderson 2007). The affective dimension of empathy stresses the emotional response of the individual when he or she identifies what the other person is experiencing, whereas the cognitive dimension emphasizes his or her understanding of the other person’s internal state, motivations and perspectives (Devoldre et al., 2010; Hoffman, 2000). In real world situations at the workplace, the organization or the community, these competencies are intertwined and manifested spontaneously by compassionate individuals during empathetic communication. The current study aims to uncover how empathy as communication is actually expressed in complex and emotionally charged interactions in the educational field. This knowledge can indicate effective statements and gestures that can be used in order to step into the shoes of the other (Rosenheim, 1992) in the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral sense.

Expanding Empathy in Higher Education

The main assumption in this study is that using successful empathic patterns by professionals in the workplace during complex encounters has great potential for establishing effective communication, constructing productive interactions, and building trust and reciprocity between all partners in organizational settings (Cooper, 2010). In the field of education, such an atmosphere has significant potential for promoting students' academic achievement (Khan et al., 2017), empowering their sense of well-being (Hamre & Pianta, 2006; Tettegah & Anderson, 2007) and their professional development (Split et.al, 2011). In addition, it plays a key role in managing complex situations and conflicts in the professional sense. For example, it has been found that positive teacher-student interaction increases the likelihood of high school students adopting positive ways to deal with conflicts (Yao & Enright, 2018). These are the reasons why one of the most relevant fields for the development of empathic competences is the academic arena, particularly in domains where productive human interactions are critical to the professional's functioning, such as teacher education. Although the importance of soft abilities is widely discussed, the focus of most programs offered in higher education is still based on teaching traditional cognitive skills, rather than on soft and complementary competencies (Wilkie, 2019). Currently, there is a consensus that higher education institutions, as part of the education system, should not educate students only in narrow, knowledge-based specializations, but must go further and provide future teachers with an integrated education. Efforts need to be concentrated on developing soft skills (European Commission, 2013).

One example of an effort for cultivating empathy in teacher education programs is the conceptual framework of the Complete Empathic Act (CEA) for teachers (Weinberger & Bakshy, 2015). The process of the CEA in teacher education settings is defined by three main dimensions: empathic awareness, empathic understanding and empathic behavior. The first dimension, awareness, addresses the ability to distinguish clearly between 'the self' and the other, while acknowledging the other and the way he or she interprets reality. The dimension of understanding enables comprehension of the situation from the other person's point of view, whether it is an affective, cognitive, or behavioral state. The behavioral dimension manifests itself in listening from the perspective of a lack of information, of postponing judgment, and after obtaining the necessary information, choosing an action compatible with the other person's state. The literature presents few other attempts to incorporate empathic components in academic programs (Costantini, 2019; Eluz et al., 2019).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The aim of the current study is to identify and describe empathic behavior, and to demonstrate how it could be manifested in complex and emotionally charged interactions in educational organizations. This, by answering the following questions:

- a. Which components in an interaction can be identified as empathic?
- b. How these empathic components can be conceptualized by recognizing patterns and creating categories and sub-categories?

METHOD

Setting

The identification process of empathic patterns in the current study was carried out through in-depth analysis of complex and emotionally charged interactions, which took place during videotaped simulations. These simulations are a part of the activities that have been developed at the Centre for Empathy in Education and in Society (CEES), which aims to cultivate empathic patterns among student-teachers and is used in professional development settings for educators (Weinberger, 2017a).

Live simulated sessions (Lamé & Simmons, 2020) are conducted in a safe learning environment (Milkins et al., 2014) with the participation of professional actors playing the role of the other. The scenario for each simulation is carefully planned and costumed authentically in line with the needs of each specific

training program. Prior to the simulation, the participants (actors and trainees) sign an agreement in which they commit to maintaining rules of ethics and confidentiality.

Simulations have many features to address the complexity of real-world situations (Davidsson & Verhagen, 2017). Video-taped simulations mimic a reality characterized by an emotionally charged atmosphere in which a topic essentially touches on values, personal and professional aspects, or a challenge to social status (Kartal et al., 2016).

During the simulated session, a participant volunteers to take part in the simulation, while the group watches it live as it occurs. The interaction is videotaped, then analyzed, and followed by debriefing. Debriefing provides the participants the opportunity to 'make sense' of the scenario and the experience by analysing it, discussing it, and by reflecting on it in order to improve their future performance as teachers (Fanning & Gaba, 2007; Kolenova & Halakova, 2019).

Procedure

Six videotaped simulations were randomly selected from a variety of scenarios that are widespread in the education system. Each five to seven minute simulation was viewed and analysed, first individually by each one of the researchers and then discussed collaboratively, for content validation. The selected simulations dealt with five main aspects of the work of a teacher and an educator:

- a. Teamwork - two videotaped simulations of teamwork in preschool dealt with the adjustment of a new preschool teacher in the kindergarten and the tension that might evolve working with veteran assistants. (videos [v] # 1; 2).
- b. Staff collaboration - a videotaped simulation of two preschool teachers who work together depicted a collaborative teamwork and the challenges involved (v # 3).
- c. Communication and interaction between school management and faculty - the scenario of the videotaped simulation was of a conversation held between a vice-principal and a school principal regarding the challenges of implementing new procedures with the entire school teaching staff (v # 4).
- d. Relationships with parents and parental involvement in the school - two videotaped simulations: one was about parent teacher conference as part of student's progress reporting (v # 5) and the other was about parents' complaint regarding misconduct and inadequate teaching (v # 6).
- e. Teacher-student rapport - a videotaped simulation of a mid-term evaluation conversation between a teacher and a student held at a parent teacher conference, demonstrated the aspect of student-teacher relationships (v # 5).

This tension of the above practiced conflicts may result from different reasons, such as: a gap in practical professional experience and academic knowledge (between the new teacher, who has little experience, and the veteran colleagues who have meaningful seniority in the field), difficulties in accepting a change in the way things are led, or problems in adjusting to different perspectives on a pedagogical issue.

Data Analysis

The discourse analysis of the six videos transcripts was conducted using observational methods, which are promising and productive in exploring empathic competences and behaviors in an unbiased manner (e.g., Bylund & Makoul, 2005). The uniqueness of the thematic analysis is anchored in its systematic multi-step sequence (See Table 1), accumulating a variety of examples for empathic behaviors, from the educational simulated encounters.

TABLE 1
THE MULTI-STEP THEMATIC ANALYSIS PROCEDURE

Steps	Performed by...	Transcripts number
a	4 internal experts separately	1, 2, 3
b		
c		
d	4 internal experts in collaboration	1, 2, 3
e		
f		4,5,6

The analysis was carried out by four internal experts (the authors of this paper) and included the six following steps:

- a) identification of empathic discourse or behavior at the video transcript and its documentation by citing written examples;
- b) conceptualization of each example by naming the identified gestures;
- c) gathering concepts with similar characteristics into categories and sub-categories and conceptualizing the categories;
- d) tightening the conceptualization of the categories;
- e) enriching the sub-categories with additional relevant examples;
- f) validating the framework by analysing further three videotaped simulation.

The first three steps (a, b, c) were performed by each expert separately for the first three transcripts. The following two steps (d, e) were carried out in collaboration through a dialog among the internal experts, for the same three transcripts. The next step (f), agreement on categories and sub-categories, was carried out in collaboration through a dialog among the internal experts, for the other three transcripts. As described in detail above, the multi-step analysis was accompanied by a conversation between the researchers, referring to the conceptualized categories and determining to which extent each of them represents an empathic pattern, which is relevant to interpersonal communication in conversation. According to their comments the naming of the categories and the sub-categories were re-tightened.

The thematic analysis of the empathic gestures was conducted by using qualitative tools. First, an intuitive process was conducted to categorize the meaning of each gesture that has been detected – from the bottom up (open coding) (Bowen, 2009). On the basis of this coding, major themes were formulated to sub-categories using an ‘etic-emic’ approach (Denzin & Lincoln, 2002; 2008). Etic categories come from existing theory on the topic by the researcher during analysis or are taken from the conceptual structure of the people studied, while emic categories have been developed inductively (Maxwell, 2005). The sub-categories themes were mapped by finding the connections between them, and the categories of the analysis were determined. Finally, the analytic process of grouping all the statements in their respective categories was carried out from the top down.

Participants

The participants in the simulations were: six trainees and six professional actors. The trainees, three males and three females, were teacher education students from a leading teachers’ college in Israel and educators in various stages of their professional development.

Ethics

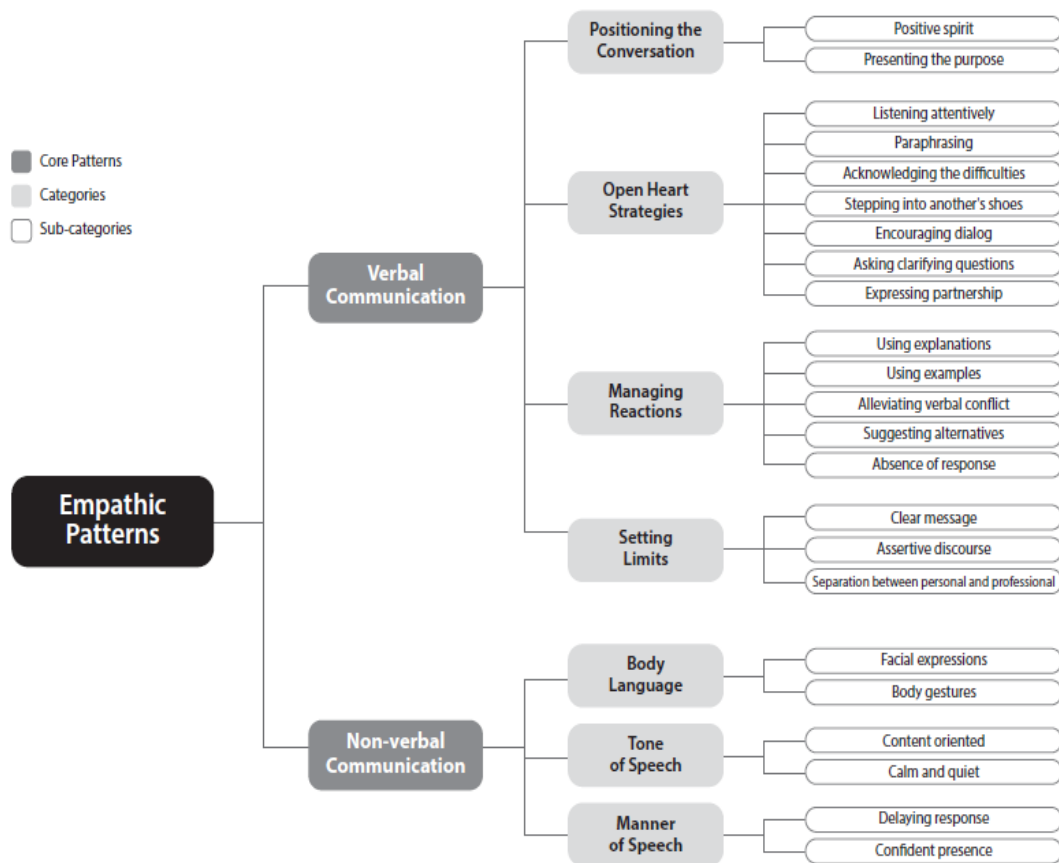
The study has followed the professional ethical rules for conducting research, and it was approved by the institutional IRB (ethical approval No 1021 for the protection of human participants in the research). All the subjects (participants and actors) have provided appropriate informed consent to use the videotaped sessions for the purposes of academic investigation and publication. The information was gathered

anonymously and there was absolutely no personal identification of the subjects, either during the information gathering phase, the analysis or during the writing of this article.

FINDINGS

The discourse and the gestures of the participants in the simulations were perceived as authentic examples of empathic patterns in educational organizations. In-depth qualitative analysis of the simulated encounters enabled the formulation of an **Empathic Patterns in Interpersonal Communication (EPIC)** conceptual model, which includes two patterns, seven categories and 23 sub-categories, each of which was derived from several examples (See Fig. 1).

FIGURE 1
THE EPIC MODEL



As can be seen in Figure 1, the model distinguishes between two core patterns that are intertwined, the verbal pattern (which refers to: What was said?) and the non-verbal pattern (which refers to: How was it said?).

The verbal communication pattern refers to four oral content categories addressing the cognitive elements of empathy: a) positioning the conversation; b) open heart strategies; c) managing reactions; and, d) setting boundaries. Each one of the four categories includes sub-categories, with a final total of 17. The non-verbal pattern refers to three categories which address the behavioral dimensions of empathic patterns: a) body language; b) tone of speech; and, c) manner of speech, all together containing six sub-categories.

Each sub-category is associated with many examples from different video transcripts. Due to the limit of information that could be included in a paper we chose few examples of the sub-categories of each pattern of the EPIC conceptual model, in order to present the varied and impactful empathic patterns. The number that is presented in brackets next to the quote represents the number of the videotaped simulation from which it was taken.

The Verbal Categories

The meaning of the interaction as articulated by the verbal communication during the encounter between the parties was analysed. The first category of the verbal pattern - *positioning the conversation* - addresses the attempt to frame the beginning of the encounter. It consists of two sub-categories:

1. Using opening remarks that convey a positive spirit and trust, such as:
How are you? I must tell you that I like the atmosphere in our kindergarten. You can see how it reflects on the children as well (v. # 1).
2. Presenting the purpose of the conversation, such as:
There's something that I'd like to share with you, which has been bothering me a bit (v. # 2; v. # 3).
I want to hear what's bothering you so we can have a nice time working together (v. # 3)

Both strategies are meant to start the interaction in a focused, positive and promising manner.

The content of the *open heart* category, includes seven sub-categories and is considered the primary empathic proficiency. The following sub-categories were detected during the analysis of the simulation encounters, and are accompanied by examples.

1. Listening attentively to a different point of view:
I'm listening...It's important for me to understand what you think and feel about this (v. # 5).
I take note of everything you brought to my attention (v. # 6).
2. Echoing the words of the conversation partner (paraphrasing):
Are you telling me that there are classes that you don't want to participate in?(v. # 5)
I understand that you feel that all the management responsibility falls on you. (v. # 4).
3. Using expressions that acknowledge the difficulties:
I understand you're used to a different setting. It's all new for you... (v. # 2)
Yes, it's a bit boring. You're right. (v. # 5)
You feel that a lot of the responsibility for discipline falls on you (v. # 3).
4. Stepping into the shoes of the other, such as suggesting to rephrase or using role-playing:
How would you rephrase it? Try to say it differently, without raising your voice (v. # 1).
5. Encouraging dialog by inviting a response:
It's important for me that you speak now, Dan. Share with us (v. # 5).
I would like to hear what you would consider as a success (v. # 6).
6. Asking open and clarifying questions:
Let's hear, what would you be willing to do?(v. # 4).
7. Using the plural forms which express partnership:
You're not alone in this...(experience). We'll go through it together (v. # 5).

Opening your heart to another person necessitates listening with an attentive ear, without prejudice and while suspending judgment, in order to engage in a respectful dialog and promote a chance for new learning about the person in conversation with you. To adopt such a stance requires the professional practitioners to shift their attention to the other, rather than focusing on themselves. Such an act is called by Schutz (1967) a 'thou-orientation' and by Rosenheim (1992), 'stepping into the shoes of the other'. This insight led to the conceptualization of the next category.

The third category, *managing reactions*, refers to the characteristics of the type of response given by the participant. It includes four sub-categories of active reactions and one more, a unique sub-category - absence of a response (all together, five sub-categories):

1. Using explanations, rationalizations and reasoning:

Raising your voice is not an appropriate way for you to cope with this situation: it goes against the educational principles I believe in and is not effective at all (v.# 2). You need to enter the class you chose to take. You have to be committed to the schedule you chose. (v. # 6).

2. Using concrete examples as a means of refraining from generalizations:
You remember the event at the playground yesterday? When the children were playing today at the playground, I heard that you raised your voice at Tom. (v. # 1).
3. Alleviating verbal conflict:
*I will pay attention to this; next time I'll try to be aware of it (v. # 1).
Before I respond, do you have anything else to add? (v. # 6).*
4. Suggesting alternatives:
Maybe we'll do it gradually, one step at the time? (v. # 4).
5. The absence of response:
The fifth sub-category refers to the participant's self-restraint. That is to say, the empathic partner consciously and deliberately chooses to which statements she or he responds or ignores. For example, she may intentionally ignore defiant and judgmental statements and focus on discussion of concrete assertions or facts that are related to the matter.

Managing reactions provides a basis for fruitful interaction by arousing mutual awareness of the other's presence, feelings of value, belonging and trust (Shady & Larson, 2010).

Nevertheless, empathic discourse is not defined only by being able to place oneself in another's shoes. Reaching new understandings by all parties, which can move the encounter towards a turning point, occasionally also requires *setting limits* – the fourth category. In this category, three sub-categories were identified:

1. Sending a clear message, such as:
Please don't raise your voice, it's off limits (v. # 2).
2. Conducting an assertive discourse, such as:
With all due respect to your concerns, please allow me to finish my argument (v.# 5).
3. Separation between personal and professional, such as:
I see your point , but the fact that I'm young doesn't mean that I do not know my job (v.# 1)

The Non-Verbal Categories

The non-verbal pattern is articulated by unspoken gestures, such as eye contact (gaze), physical closeness, body language, facial expressions, and the modulation and tone of voice (Weinberger & Bakshy, 2015). This pattern includes three categories, as follows:

Body language, for example:

1. Facial expressions promoting attentiveness and a relaxed atmosphere, such as:
Making eye contact, smiling, nodding in correspondence with the meaning of the conversation (v. # 1;2;6).
2. Attendant body movements, for example:
Leaning the body forward as a gesture of being present and attentive (v. # 2;4;6)

Tone of speech, for example:

1. *Using a varied and content-oriented tone* delivering a message of alertness and interest in the conversation (v. # 5).
2. *Speaking in a calm and quiet tone* promotes a peaceful atmosphere and a feeling of safety (v. # 3; 5).

Manner of speech, which includes:

1. *Silence, pausing, delaying the response* as indicators of listening and letting the partner express him or herself thoroughly (v. # 4)
2. *A confident presence* without making assertions but declaring her/his opinion, taking the reins and leading the discourse (v. # 1).

The non-verbal components of the empathic discourse are essential for creating a relaxed atmosphere and a high level of awareness for all parties in the encounter. Additionally, this component usually aims to support the verbal content expressed during the encounter and helps to produce the sense of a complete and coherent message to the interlocutor.

In conclusion, the rich and abundant empathic information found within complex interactions exhibits two patterns: verbal information – the content transmitted, and non-verbal information – the form of the transmitted content. The components of both patterns compose the EPIC conceptual model presented above. Along with the categories, sub-categories and examples, they respond to the research questions in this study.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study highlight that empathy is a state of mind; it is a process that involves being sensitive to what other people are experiencing (Weinberger & Bakshy, 2015). A successful empathic encounter is always characterized by reaching a new understanding or a solution during the dialog. Achieving such a positive change requires many honest attempts of profound listening, stepping into the other's shoes, setting clear boundaries, inspiring a feeling of trust, and finally – creative and positive thinking.

In this study, we undertake an initial development of a conceptual model by mapping its categories against videotaped simulations. The deep analysis of complex and emotionally charged interactions in the educational field led to identification of diverse empathic reactions and behaviors, which have been conceptualized into two patterns, seven categories and 23 sub-categories, and all together generate an **Empathic Patterns in Interpersonal Communication (EPIC)** conceptual model (see Figure 1). The model represents patterns of effective empathic interactions comprised of spoken discourse modes and non-verbal bodily gestures. Phenomenological Empathy Training (Englander, 2019), which trains psychology students to focus on interpersonal understanding in the context of profound listening, also distinguishes between verbal and non-verbal patterns in empathic responses. In real world situations, both verbal and non-verbal patterns are intertwined and create a profound impact on fruitful discourse in complex and emotionally charged situations. The various examples, which accompany each sub-category at the model, demonstrate possible ways to apply empathy in concrete situations at a workplace and the community. Uniting all the features of the analytical process and conceptualizing them enabled the complex phenomenon and the multifaceted process – empathy – to be addressed in a concrete and a direct way.

A similar differentiation of response patterns and specified categories and sub-categories has appeared in various recent studies which focused on analysis of successful empathic communication. For example, a study that focused on simulated parent–teacher conversation, conducted in a context similar to our study, recalls many of the EPIC concepts (Walker & Legg, 2018). The scholars present a system for evaluating student teachers' (in a teacher education program in the US) communication performance, focusing on the following criteria: opening the interaction, sharing and gathering information, making an action plan, empathy, using positive tone and managing flow.

Another study conducted on 'smart speakers' in counselling settings in the context of Chinese culture, reported that modifying the voice was interpreted as an expression of empathy at the interpersonal communication level (Sun et al., 2019). For instance, when professional counsellors applied a 'tone of voice' strategy during an emotional interaction, it was considered the most timely and efficient way to demonstrate empathy: 'When facing sad visitors, the speed of speech should be slow, the tone of the voice should be sounded low' (Sun et al., 2019, p. 357).

The fact that studies conducted in different cultures and professional contexts, even those using technologically advanced methods (Kumano et al., 2015), all point to the same themes strengthens the external validity of the analysis and conceptualization presented in this study. The uniqueness of the current study is that all these categories were formulated during an inductive process and created an entire integrated conceptual model which reflects the complexity of empathy in real life, at specific culture.

Additionally, the proposed conceptual model of this study aligns with the SEL (social and emotional learning) framework which has become increasingly common in the educational context in recent years.

SEL encompasses a set of skills through which children and adults understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions. (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL], 2020). Recent research has shown the need to reconsider teacher education preparation curricula so that they address these social-emotional competencies and prepare student teachers to face the VUCA world (Hadar et al., 2020). Indeed, recent findings indicate that integrating SEL assignments in teacher education programs benefits both teacher candidates and the students they teach (McCarthy, 2021).

The EPIC conceptual model has vast potential for a meaningful theoretical contribution, and implications for practice. From the theoretical perspective, the components of the conceptualized model could serve as a systematic inquiry on the theme of ‘empathy’ in education and other settings, generating further studies on the subject. They extend, deepen and complement the conceptual framework of the ‘complete empathic act (CEA)’ (Weinberger & Bakshy, 2015). Practicing the ability to understand the internal state of the other, whether affective or cognitive, requires the practitioner to function like a skilled human instrument, collecting information with a discerning eye and attentive ear, using the skills of open and careful observation, as well as open discussion and active listening. Thus, from the empathic perspective, the responsible and the professional reaction requires choosing the action compatible with the other person’s state, based on the information obtained (Weinberger & Bakshy, 2015). The EPIC conceptual model provides the CEA with a layer of appropriate, explicit and expressive concepts and terms, which reliably describe the empathic responses and reactions needed in complex encounters. The components of the EPIC model conceptualized and termed in the current study represent the meta-structure of the empathic act from the perspective of the vast array of competencies required and the potential of empathy as a tool that empowers all the parties involved in the empathic encounter.

From the practical perspective, based on the findings, an academic course focusing on development of empathic competencies could be constructed for teacher education and professional development settings. Particularly in the current Covid-19 reality, characterized by the VUCA world (Ng et al., 2020), the relevance of soft skills, along with empathy, for interpersonal settings is obvious (Millar et al., 2018). Videotaped examples of empathic gestures and empathic discourse could be used to illustrate effective empathic behavior in various contexts that deal with social-emotional learning and acquisition of soft skills in teacher education (e.g., Weinberger & Bakshy, 2015) and other frameworks. There is a general consensus that such operative examples have great importance for students, although teacher training programs give them relatively limited emphasis. Development of soft skills in academic programs usually appears to be a component of a ‘hidden curriculum’, namely the unwritten, unofficial, and often unintended lessons, values, and perspectives that are part of the organizational culture of that environment. The main reasons for this are that most university professors do not know how to teach empathy (Cinque, 2016), and the opportunities to engage in real-life problem solving during higher education are limited. Yet, using videotaped vignettes and simulations illustrating empathetic gestures, can help them in this aim. Research confirms that simulations are among the most effective means to facilitate learning of complex skills (Chernikova et al., 2020). Observation of the emotional experiences of others has great potential for changing empathy levels among in-service teachers (Everhart, 2016).

In order to assess empathic behavior in different organizational settings, it may be possible to convert the EPIC conceptual model into a more concrete working tool for classification. It could be used in research programs and in educational settings. For example, students could use the various rubrics to assess their empathic behaviors and monitor their own empathic development during a particular course or training process. It could be an efficient reflective tool for metacognitive and self-regulated functioning. Another option is to use this conceptual model as a research tool in future studies that address various aspects of empathy. For further research, we recommend examining the effectiveness of the EPIC conceptual model and to test its applicability into practice in complicated and emotionally loaded situations in settings other than education.

The limitations of this study are mainly related to the generality of the findings. According to Hall’s framework (1976), we can claim that our analysis is based on a typical Western discourse, where intention or meaning is best communicated and gets across through direct and explicit verbal messages (low context).

In other cultures (high context), the communication patterns and styles need to be addressed by further research (Asai et al., 2020).

The findings and conclusions of the current study are relevant to improvements needed in communication, as identified in the literature, especially in relation to handling psychosocial issues and conveying empathy. The EPIC conceptual model practically establishes useful professional language to inform communication training in various fields of higher education. As higher education institutions seek to distinguish themselves in an increasingly competitive environment, they must demonstrate their contribution and value in preparing students for success in the workplace by offering attention on human relations, as well (Kastberg et al., 2020).

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