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Research Article

Research Trend on Empathy and Implications for the Family Therapy Researchers and Practitioners in Korea

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine researches on empathy systematically in the field of counseling and therapy, identifying recent trend and changes in empathy research in Korean journals of counseling and family therapy. For this purpose, this study examined the literature of 32 empathy-related studies in Korean counseling and therapy journals issued from 2014 to 2018. The results were as follows: First, the trend of the yearly amount of published researches on empathy during the last 5 years was inconsistent. Second, the main research topics related to empathy were attachment, positive psychology, counseling outcome, and trauma. Third, the main research subjects were counselors, adults and college students. Fourth, IRI and BLRI were the most commonly used measurement tools for empathy measurement. The amount of studies on empathy in the field of counseling general was insufficient and even more so in the field of family therapy. Therefore, the authors would like to emphasize the need for more active research on empathy within the field of family therapy.

Keywords : Empathy, Research, Counseling & Therapy, Family therapy, Trend

Introduction

Empathy is derived from the German word 'Einfühlung'. It holds the meaning of 'Empatheia,' which is translated into 'entering into the inner sentiment from the outside,' or

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to ‘sharing feelings, passion and pain of the others.’ Empathy has long been considered in various academic research fields. This trend shows that there is an acknowledgement of the important role that empathy plays on many aspects of society. However, there is no social consensus on how to define, educate and study empathy.

Rogers (1942) was the first person who presented the main characteristics of empathy in counseling. Empathy therefore has been highlighted for long as the important therapeutic factor, related to the counseling outcome. In the 1950s and 1960s, the field of counseling focused on reflection of feelings as a way of conveying the empathic attitude presented by Rogers. Many studies at that time focused on reflecting emotions and explored how they could improve it. As a result, empathy is considered to be the same as emotional reflection, and the concept and function of empathy have been defined as narrow meaning (Kim, 2013). However, studies after that time have focused on the importance of empathic attitude and position by Rogers in the latter stage of Human-Centered Counseling Model (Park, 2003). This is not only a phenomenon that understands empathy, but also interprets it as a concept that includes the relationship style of communicating and understanding the others (Howe, 2012). Kohut (1959) was also a representative scholar who emphasized empathy. He had considered empathy as a tool of collecting psychoanalytic data and as a form of observation, but later he saw empathy as the ‘essential one for human bonding,’ connecting between one person and the other. In addition, Gorden (2009) who is the author of *Roots of Empathy* emphasized the importance of empathy in peace-building within a family. Therefore, empathy can be regarded as an important foundational element of a healthy family relationship.

Unfortunately, in the West, there has been a decrease in empathy research in the field of counseling and therapy. There are two reasons for this. One is the matter of conceptual uncertainty about empathy. Although scholars have undergone numerous discussions on defining empathy, all agree that empathy is a construct with complex dimensions, which is difficult to understand with a single point of view. Due to this complexity and multifaceted aspects of empathy, many researchers have not provided adequate information on how to define and measure empathy (Pedersen, 2009). If empathy is not defined systematically, it might exist as the abstract phenomenon shared by human beings with each other (Clark, 2010). The second is the shift of focus in the field of counseling to the study of other therapeutic factors such as working alliances. In this process, the empathy of the therapist was sometimes regarded only as a component of the working alliance (Duan & Hill, 1996). Even though counselors recognize the importance of empathy, empathy research is stagnating because there have not been sufficient empirical grounds for the function and role of empathy. As a result, after the 1990s, there has been a decreased number of empathy

research in U.S and Europe (Park, 2003).

But in Korea, interest in empathy is increasing because of the growing interests in the role of human emotions across various fields of social science (Choi, 2011, & Pinker, 2009). However, the research using empathy as a therapeutic tool in Korean counseling field is still insufficient. Therefore, this study examines systematically the research on empathy in the field of counseling and therapy, and identifies the recent trends and changes of empathy research in Korea, in an effort to promote empathy as a major therapeutic factor for effective counseling.

This study was designed to analyze the empathy studies published in Korean counseling and therapy journals for the last 5 years from 2014 to 2018. This study has set the research topics as follows:

First, what is the numerical trend of the empathy researches published during the last 5 years in Korea?

Second, what are the main research topics of empathy researches?

Third, who are the main research subjects of empathy researches?

Fourth, what are the measurement tools that are primarily used in empathy researches?

Empathy and Therapeutic Relationship

Empathy

The original meaning of Empathy ('*einfühlung*') can be described as the pleasure we experience when looking upon a work of art for the first time. This displays concept of the ability to feel the essence of the art piece, by empathizing our senses, reflecting on the beauty of a painting, music or nature itself, towards the 'inner' side (Howe, 2012). This '*einfühlung*' is translated into empathy in English, derived from the Greek word '*empathia*.' It holds the meaning of '*empathia*,' which is equivalent to 'entering into the inner sentiment from outside,' or to 'sharing feelings, passion and pain of the others.' Early empirical studies on empathy has taken more importance than the emotions (Mead, 1934; Piaget, 1932). Recent research and studies, however, have expanded the viewpoint that emotional empathy as well as cognitive empathy should be understood and considered as important factors in a human relationship (Bae, & Cho, 2014). Mehrabian and Epstein (1972) separated the construct of empathy into cognitive empathy and the emotional empathy. They saw that cognitive empathy is the ability to understand and adopt the thoughts and perspective of the other, while the emotional empathy is the ability to relive

the emotion or sentiment of the other, as if experiencing it (Shin, 1999).

Cognitive empathy is about seeing, imagining and thinking about the situation from the other's perspective. This is the process of cognitive consideration, focusing on the clear cognition of the other's truth. On the other hand, there is 'primitive empathy,' which is the swift, immediate and emotional response without the complex cognitive process. We notice by feeling it, before making any judgment after recognizing and thinking about the emotional status of the other. That very feeling comes from the changing looks of ourselves, imitating the looks of the other. This is felt by our bodies, as if we are listening to the other's voice through our own. This is empathy incarnated. This is the emotional empathy, which is spontaneous, direct, and immediate. There is no thought or consideration which is conscious. This is called as the 'theory of mind,' which is the ability to find out the sentiment and intention of the other by feeling them prior to the cognitive judgment (Howe, 2012).

Theory of mind, although not verified, is the term describing the human capability. This capacity comes from the 'mirror neuron' in our brain (Choi, 2011). Mirror neurons were discovered for the first time by G. Rizzolatti, an Italian neurobiologist, at the frontal lobe of a monkey. After this discovery, there have been many hypotheses proposed on how this mirror neuron works including behavioral understanding, imitation, intention understanding, and empathy, which are the four representative fields that play a role in cognitive and language functions (Choi, 2011). Mirror neurons are also thought to potentially contribute to identity recognition (Choi, 2009). Children with high levels mirror neurons showed higher capacity for identity recognition and imitation, which improved with social interaction.

This is indeed a mysterious ability as thought and sentiment created from one's brain can be felt and reflected by the brain of another. Empathy is sentiment and at the same time it is the outcome of a certain process of thinking. It is not only an emotional response, but also cognitive one. It is also a process of understanding why others feel in the way they do. Feshbach (1997) explained empathy as an integrated process of three different principles. First, it is a cognitive ability which grasps, understands, and differentiates the other's sentiment. Second, it is a mature cognitive technique which is seeing the object through other's perspective. Third, it is what one experience, that is, the other's emotion and keeps tune with them. Empathy therefore includes: understanding how others feel, sympathizing and agreeing onto the psychological experience of the other, delivering what it is understood, and communicating (Howe, 2012). Depending on each individual, different circumstances create different levels of empathy from lower levels to higher levels. While the passive definition of empathy shows the minds of humans as the being easily influenced

by the other's sentiment, a more active definition of empathy shows the humanistic side of humans. This involves the effort to understand the other, empathy towards the other, and the desire of humans to see the world through the other's perspective by thinking, behaving and devoting to a different perspective.

Empathy in the therapeutic relationship

Counselors and psychotherapists are the people who adopt the concept of empathy in the most constructive way, along with a mission of being considerate. The therapeutic relationship between a counselor and a client is derived from the empathic understanding, which is crucial during the early stages of counseling and therapeutic process. The empathic quality of the counselor defines the quality of the relationship of the client. The quality of relationship plays a considerable role in the result of the therapy, regardless of the type (Howe, 2012).

Empathy includes both meanings of: 'knowing the other' and 'having a relationship with the other.' 'Having a relationship with the other' means a cooperative mutual activity, where the patient's trust of the therapist is increased based on the empathic ability of the therapist (Choi, 2010). One of the biggest characteristics of a counselor from the Human-Centered Model, is that the counselor tries to understand the client in the empathic way (Hong, 2002). Therefore, empathic understanding is one of the strongest influential factors which causes the change of mindset in the client (Hwang, 2008).

Peloquin (1998) also took this type of empathy as the most important factor in the therapeutic relationship between the counselor and the client, adding that this 'empathy' is the most preferred attitude and behavioral characteristic of the counselor, from the client's perspective. Even though, the level of empathetic capability is different for each person, it can be enhanced. In particular, the empathic understanding of a counselor works is essential during the therapeutic process. Because empathy is the important factor leading to the positive change of the counselor himself/herself, as well as for the client, research on the effects of empathy in the field of counseling is of utmost importance. However, studies on the use of empathy as the therapeutic tool in the relationship between the counselor and the client are still few.

Method

For the analysis, the subject studies were selected as following. First, academic journals

related to counseling and therapy in Korea and the total number of papers published regarding this topic were compiled. Second, out of the 3,932 papers, those relevant to empathy research were selected. Third, the papers published from 2014 were compiled from the KCI (Korean Citation Index) journal. Through this process, a total of 32 papers were finally subject to analysis. To select empathy-related researches, we used search engines such as the Korea Educational and Scientific Information Service (RISS), Korean Academic Information (KISS), DBPIA, E-article, and New Nonmun to search for the journal papers with the word “empathy” in keywords and titles. The number of specific papers from different journals is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Reviewed journal list and the number of papers

Journal	No. of papers
<i>Korean Journal of Counseling</i>	15
<i>Korean Counseling and psychological Therapy</i>	9
<i>Journal of Korean Society of Occupational Therapy</i>	1
<i>Korean Journal of Literature Therapy</i>	1
<i>Korean Cognitive Behavior Therapy</i>	1
<i>Journal of Korean Music Therapy</i>	2
<i>Korean Journal of Art Psychology</i>	2
<i>Family and Family Therapy</i>	1
Total	32

In this study, classification and evaluation criteria were set to achieve the purpose of the study. The classification categories were the trend of amount of publications, the topics and the subjects of researches, and the tools of measurement.

Results

The number of empathy researches published in recent 5 years

The number of empathy studies per year of issuance was analyzed to examine the recent research trend on empathy from Korean counseling and psychotherapy fields. Its result is shown in Table 2 below. We can see there are a number of studies published especially in 2016, but overall, there is an inconsistent tendency in the amount of the researches.

Table 2. Number of empathy researches published in recent 5 years

Year of issuance	No. of papers	%
2014	7	21.9
2015	3	9.3
2016	14	43.8
2017	7	21.9
2018	1	3.1
	32	100.0

Major topics of empathy researches

The topics of empathy researches analyzed in this study are shown in Table 3. Research on empathy related to attachment accounted for the largest percentage with 15.6%, followed by positive psychology, counseling performance, and trauma with 12.5% each. Interpersonal relationships and stress were also major topics of empathy researches.

Table 3. Major topics of empathy researches

Major topic	No. of papers	%
affection	5	15.6
positive psychology	4	12.5
counseling achievement	4	12.5
trauma	4	12.5
interpersonal relationship	3	9.3
stress	3	9.3
self-esteem	2	6.2
parenting attitude	2	6.2
intimacy	1	3.1
other	4	12.5
Total	32	100.0

Main research subjects of empathy researches

Thirty one studies were selected to be analyzed except for one meta-analysis study. As shown in Table 4, counselors were the focus of 31.2% of empathy researches. Other studies

focused on adults (21.9%), college students (21.9%), high school students, children, and adolescents.

Table 4. Main research subjects of empathy researches

Research subject	No. of papers	%
Counselor	10	31.2
Adults	7	21.9
University students	7	21.9
High school student	2	6.3
Elementary/Middle/High school students	2	6.3
Husbands and wives	1	3.1
Middle school student	1	3.1
Elementary school student	1	3.1
Other	1	3.1
Total	32	100.0

Major assessment instruments for empathy researches

The results produced by empathy measurement tools in 28 studies, excluding non-measurement of empathy (such as qualitative research, meta-analysis, etc.), are as shown in Table 5. The table shows that IRI and BLRI combined make up almost 44% of the instruments used in empathy studies. However, when considering that ‘other’ are used as much as IRI and BLRI combined, it can be seen that various measures are used in empathy researches.

Table 5. Major assessment instruments for empathy researches

Instrument	No. of papers	%
IRI	8	25
BLRI	6	18.7
EQ	2	6.3
Mitchell	2	6.3
other	10	43.7
Total	28	100.0

* 4 researches without measuring empathy were excluded.

Details on the major empathy measurements frequently used in the studies are as follows. First, the Interpersonal Reaction Index (IRI) is the most widely used measure, accounting for 25% of the total papers analyzed in this study. This scale was developed by Davis (1980) as a multidimensional approach, unlike the previous one dimensional measures of empathy. The scale has four sub-scales; the “fantasy scale”, the “perspective taking scale”, the “emphatic concern scale”, and the “distress scale”.

Second, Barrett & Lennard Relationship Inventory (BLRI) is also a common measure of empathy studies. This measurement assumes that there is a clear distinction between the subject matter and the content of empathy in the process of developing empathy. This scale has five sub-scale dimensions: level of respect, empathy, consistency, unconditional respect, and openness.

Third, studies that used the ‘Empathy Quotient (EQ)’ were about 6.3% in total, which in this case is not very significant although the scale is the foundation for developing various scales for measuring empathy. Baron Cohen & Wheelwright (2004) used this scale in order to develop a scale that can be applied clinically, considering the multidimensional nature of empathy. EQ consists of 60 questions in total, with 20 items among these are not scored as they are the filtering items. Other measurements included Mitchel, RCS, BES, and others.

Discussion

Of the 3932 empathy research papers listed on academic journals, this study focused on only 32 papers within Korean journals of counseling and family therapy, which were registered to KCI since 2014. By analyzing the recent Korean researches on empathy, this study aimed to examine the research trend and to propose the future direction of empathy research in family therapy and counseling fields.

First, the number of papers on empathy published during the last 5 years was inconsistent. This reflected the vagueness of the concept of empathy and the shift of interests in counseling researches. The concept of empathy has been abstract and complicated and, due to these difficulties, researches in the field of counseling were being focused on work alliances, counseling outcomes, and relationship variables rather than on empathy itself. Therefore, researches on empathy tended to be done in relation to these variables rather than empathy as a sole topic of a study. Such is the case, more researches are required to investigate empathy as a sole topic.

Second, attachment, positive psychology, counseling performance, and trauma were popular research topics related with empathy. Previous studies, which were done before

2014, had focused on empathy simply in relation with the therapy method or counseling outcome (Kim, 2013). However, since 2014, more variant factors have been given attention as related variables with empathy. This change in empathy research indicated expansion of research questions beyond the counseling field. Empathy is now a concept that is given attention by other research areas such as human psychology and human relations. Therefore, empathy researchers in counseling and therapy need to explore the possible linkage with the researches of the other fields, while seeking their own uniqueness of the field.

Third, the main subjects of empathy research were counselors and general population which included children and adolescents as well as university students. In addition, a variety of groups, such as couples and special sub-group of adults, were studied in empathy researches. For example, Lim (2015) studied patients with schizophrenia focused on cognitive aspects of empathy.

Fourth, many assessment tools were used in empathy studies. Many studies used Davis (1980)'s Interpersonal Reaction Index (IRI) in the context of the compound element theory and the Barrett & Lennard (1993)'s Relationship Inventory (BLRI) which emphasized communication. Most studies have made significant modifications to the original measurements and there has been a tendency to combine various scales to measure empathy. It is necessary to select or develop standardized measurement tool which fits to each research purpose for the development of empathy research.

In the papers analyzed in this study, all studies used self-reported questionnaires in measuring empathy. To compensate the limitations of the questionnaires, it can be suggested to use the observation method as they measure the frequency and characteristics of empathy expressed (e.g., Bonvicini et al., 2009). Another example of empathy measurement was used by Feshbach(1997). He measured the level of empathetic communication of psychiatrists by observing nonverbal behaviors instead of listening dialogue. His study found that the level of empathy was evaluated better when using the audio or videotape instead of reading the verbatim. Since the method of measurement affects the credibility of the study, future studies should pay more attention to the measurement of empathy.

It is hard to summarize the trend of empathy researches in the field of Korean counseling and psychotherapy in a few words. Despite the recent increased interest in empathy, it is difficult to say that empathy research in counseling and psychotherapy has been actively carried out. Until 2013, empathy researches had focused on empathy as a general personality trait or an affecting factor of counseling outcomes(Kim, 2013). Even up to now, most of the empathy studies have conducted researches focused on the related variables of empathy. In the field of family therapy, there was only one study on empathy(Lee & Kwon,

2016) during last 5 years. It is necessary to pay more attention to empathy research in the field of family therapy. It is also necessary to examine concepts and functions of empathy in depth, using not only quantitative but also qualitative methods. In addition, the selection or development of appropriate empathy measurement tools which fit to the concrete concept and attribution of empathy is needed.

This is the era of empathy indeed. Interests on the concept and applications of empathy have been explosive in this early 21st century. Pinker (2009) proclaimed empathy as the most recently defined modern instinct among all the natural instincts of humankind, and has made arguments on its unique characteristics. Empathy is now seen as the proof of our humanity. So, empathy is now explored in various research fields, and people recognize its importance in human relationship. The common reason for the interest in empathy in various fields is that empathy fosters cooperation, solidarity, and citizenship, while showing the nature of human orientation. With this awareness, research on the aspects of empathy is being conducted in many fields related with humankind.

Empathy is a traditionally noted variable in the field of counseling and therapy, but it is questionable to say that advanced researches have been conducted on empathy in the field of psychology and counseling in Korea. Especially in the field of family therapy, there is little research on empathy. There is a good reason to emphasize empathy in family therapy when we consider that the development of empathy begins from family.

This study sought to attract interest about empathy in the field of family therapy in Korea. However, due to the limited time and energy, the scope of reviewed studies was too narrow. It only included the studies published during the recent 5 years and excluded the academic conference proceedings, theses and dissertations. In addition, there were some missing studies among academic papers due to limited access to the literature.

Despite these limitations, this study tried to build a foundation for a comprehensive understanding of empathy research and to attract interest in empathy within Korean counseling and family therapy area.

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Biography

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