

Creative Compassion - Towards a Culture of Relational Empathy. Training Social Skills through Art-based Focusing

I.

Focusing cultivates self-compassion and compassion for others. This is true as long as the existential needs of both parties are met. However, things become complicated when diversity in culture, gender, religion, nationality, or attitude confronts the status, privileges, or power of 'the other'.

How can we consider the needs of 'the other' when our own needs are ignored, our status is dismantled, and our attempts at progress are sabotaged?

II.

Compassion is an attitude rooted in agape, or selfless love. It is widely regarded as a moral virtue. The concept of compassion is symbolized by Sarah's Circle (Fox, 1999). This theological metaphor from the Old Testament represents connectedness, social justice, and inclusion. Like the circle, compassion is integrative. It is not exclusive, as suggested by the famous story of Jacob's ladder. This Old Testament metaphor tells of the opportunity to live in grace and reach the top. Falling out of grace results in a deep crash.

The idea of individual thriving and orientation toward success seems to contradict the ethics of Sarah's circle. The circle's symbol lacks an upward spiral for personal agency or individual progression. Here, the ethics of the collective seem to be the guideline.

It can be appealing to live according to the 'circle' metaphor when it comes to personal emotions, communication, feelings, and senses and according to the 'ladder' metaphor when it comes to personal benefits, social privileges, material advantages, and political empowerment.

Relational Empathy (RE) (Maureen O'Hara) is the capacity to respond flexibly to individual and collective issues, depending on the situation. Having the capacity for RE means being able to pendulate between egocentric and sociocentric worldviews. RE enables one to tune into a specific situation and the needs of those involved through empathy.

It offers an alternative to living either socially exclusively (indifferent to minorities or the marginalized) or socially inclusively (indifferent to personal thriving or the need for individual progression). RE is a creative way of embracing life's dichotomies, as symbolized by the metaphors of 'ladder' and 'circle'. It recognizes the interconnectedness of individual and collective life, and embraces the complexity of their interactions.

III.

Relational Empathy is an attitude that can be learned and developed. Any training needs a starting point. A Focusing-based Creative Compassion practice offers a user-friendly introduction to the fundamentals of the attitude of relational empathy (RE).

Practitioners learn to resonate with and acknowledge their personal preferences and limitations on the symbolic level of the arts through Felt Sense. They approach what they are attracted to artistically and can easily identify with, which represents something of 'me here' (an egocentric view). They also approach what they are disinterested in, not attracted to, and hesitant to identify with. This represents 'something of the other/you there'. Practitioners learn to creatively process both orientations toward a positive outcome while respecting both poles (a sociocentric view).

Learning to shift between different worldviews is an ongoing process of growth. As practitioners become accustomed to holding different worldviews at the symbolic level of the arts, they develop a broader range of self-actualization. They are empowered to check with their felt sense to see if the egocentric or sociocentric view matches their situation.

Using Focusing and the arts as a foundation for developing basic RE skills has many advantages. Focusing is a way to connect with oneself. It allows bodily feelings to emerge and connect with what feels true. The arts provide a safe space to symbolically process difficult feelings. They allow practitioners to symbolize what cannot be expressed in words.

Through the use of canvases and paints, practitioners can explore dichotomous aspects of life that are often considered exclusive, such as inside versus outside,

included versus excluded, part versus whole, top versus bottom, calm versus dynamic, dark versus light, framed versus unframed, and chaotic versus regulated. These dichotomies can be represented through artistic forms, lines, and colors. Artistic engagement enables the creation of linear forms representing private or collective spaces and protective borders. These forms do not have to be rigid. They can be blurred, exceeded, or dissolved. They represent 'opening up' (a sociocentric view) rather than 'blocking off' (an egocentric view). Through creation and experimentation, art practitioners can master what is difficult to handle in day-to-day situations.

Exploring life's dichotomies through mindful, embodied art practice directly impacts the practitioner. It can change their understanding of the world. During art activities, the practitioner's body sense is implicitly actualized (Rappaport, 2009, 2023), launching a sense of organismic ethics or ethics based on the life-forwarding movement.

Organismic ethics come from the living body and are interactive, positive, and supportive. They can serve as a vibrant source for discovering one's socioethical orientation. Art-making itself is free of ethics and can generate a new kind of ethics.

IV.

When a body sense is actualized, the practitioner becomes part of a First-Person Science (Gendlin, 2003). When the body operates as an inner laboratory of evidence, providing truth and validation from within, the practitioner gains access to a meaning that transcends cultural knowledge, habits, and relationships. This is important because ethical standards are bound by cultural structures and dependent on cultural or religious framing.

According to Gendlin, engaging in First-Person Science involves stepping out of cultural frames and concepts. First Person Science generates embodied meaning that implies more than any existing concept or scheme can reveal. Using the body as an inner laboratory of evidence allows practitioners to deconstruct and reconstruct their ideas about culturally bound ethics. They can reconnect to a sense of human connectedness that transcends cultural frameworks.

Sorting out new ideas about how to be in the world from a standpoint of embodied humanity is highly empowering. Feeling self-empowered reduces fear and opens one up to seeing others become empowered as well.

V.

The practitioner begins by perceiving and reproducing material from the fine arts. This indirect creative approach is more common to most of us (receptive arts engagement). Then, they experience intermodal shifts and discover new forms of self-expression through active art-making. Next, they learn how to practise empathy by connecting with their inner self and another artist.

How can a practitioner relate to another artist while practicing Creative Compassion without another artist being around?

When involved in embodied arts engagement, the practitioner relates to the invisible artist who speaks through the fine arts reference picture. The artist's message comes through, even when the practitioner tries to shut it off. The interaction between artwork and viewer (art-view) and artist-within-the-picture and viewer (artist-viewer) is intertwined, forming an ongoing, multilayered process.

Sometimes, the practitioner likes the professional artwork (or parts of it), but dislikes the artist behind the reference picture. Nevertheless, without the artist, the artwork to which the practitioner is attracted would not exist. Whether or not the practitioner likes the artist, relating to someone within the reference picture is part of the process.

In daily life, practitioners may feel uncomfortable relating to significant others, especially when they dislike them or their attitudes, cultural habits, or religious practices. In Creative Compassion practice, however, the practitioner's inner artist and body sense do the relational work.

This is especially beneficial when the practitioner has experienced feelings of isolation, expulsion, bullying, powerlessness, or helplessness. Encountering challenging people in the outside world might then be too big of a step.

Even those with stable personal backgrounds can benefit from this practice. They may find that it's okay to work with people who have different habits, moral standards, or ideas.

Relating to someone else (responding to the artist within the picture) is invigorating. It bridges the gap between the idea of 'me here' (in my atomic zone of perceiving the world) and 'you there/the other' (in a world I am not part of or cannot reach). Even when practiced alone, Creative Compassion training implicitly develops interactive skills:

1. The practitioner engages in an aesthetic encounter with another person, which involves an implicit encounter with the creator of the reference picture and their historical, social, cultural, and artistic context.
2. The practitioner relates artistically, differently from how they relate in daily life. They also experience Focusing-based relating through self-paced CCP directives (videos and manuals made available). The intersection of these two modes of relating is powerful and self-affirming.
3. The practitioner is contained within the field of Focusing and the arts. This field revitalizes the practitioner by providing safety. In a safe environment, the curiosity of every human being to experiment and try new things in small doses takes over. New ways of relating can emerge from this curiosity.

Relational empathy reveals the 'Bigger Us'. In Creative Compassion practice, the 'Bigger Us' is: The art practitioner, their inner artist, the professional artwork of reference, the professional artist within the picture, and the Experiential Third (Blob, 2022)—what arises unexpectedly as a gift through artistic relating, artistic expression, and embodied experience in the given situation.

References

- Blob, F. (2022) Das Experienzielle Dritte: Focusing Konzepte für die Kunsttherapie. Abschlussarbeit Wissenschaftliche Weiterbildung Kunsttherapie (Diploma of Advanced Studies) Katholische Universität Freiburg.
- Gendlin, E. T. (2003): Beyond Postmodernism: From Concepts through Experience. In: Frie, R. (Ed.): Understanding Experience: Psychotherapy and Postmodernism, Routledge, S. 100-115.
- Fox, M. (1999): A Spirituality named Compassion. Uniting Mystical Awareness with Social Justice, 1979/1990/1999, Inner Traditions.
- Maureen o'Hara <<https://maureen.ohara.net/pubs/Relational%20Empathy.pdf>>

Rappaport L. (2009): Focusing-Oriented Art Therapy. Accessing the Body's Wisdom and Creative Intelligence, Jessica Kingsley.

Rappaport, L. (2023): Focusing-Oriented Expressive Arts Therapy. In: Malchiodi, C. (ed), Handbook of Expressive Arts Therapy, pp.117-141, Guilford.