



Exploring the Value of Storytelling for Developing Empathy in Caring Professions Workers: A Pilot Study

Lesley Gill¹, Marjolein Schaddelee¹, Samuel Turner¹, Phil Ramsey²

¹School of Business, Otago Polytechnic, New Zealand, ²School of Business, Massey University, New Zealand

Abstract

Empathy skills in the workplace are an important contributor to organizational success, particularly in caring professions such as service sector roles: nurses, teachers, counselors, social workers, retail staff, and more; where employees constantly deal with human distress. Empathy is the human characteristic of connecting and responding to another's distress. It is only when we are aware of the challenges of another that we can connect with their struggles. Awareness comes through hearing or the telling of someone's story, which in turn generates an empathic response, resulting in a positive "helping" action toward the distressed person. Empathy, the word originating from the Greek "empathia" means to appreciate others by entering their world, and refers to an ability to reach into another's situation to appreciate what they may be experiencing. Empathy recognizes and uses emotional data available from the experience to respond with kindness and understanding.

Keywords: Empathy; Method of Empathy-based Stories; Storytelling; Listening; Authenticity; Trust; Gender

1. Introduction

Empathy skills in the workplace are an important contributor to organizational success, particularly in caring professions such as service sector roles; nurses, teachers, counselors, social workers, retail staff, and more; where employees constantly deal with human distress. Empathy is the human characteristic of connecting and responding to another's distress. It is only when we are aware of the challenges of another that we can connect with their struggles. Self-awareness comes through hearing or the telling of someone's story, which in turn generates an empathic response, resulting in a positive "helping" action toward the distressed person. Empathy, the word originating from the Greek "empathia" means to appreciate others by entering their world and refers to an ability to reach into another's situation to appreciate what they may be experiencing. Empathy recognizes and uses emotional data available from the experience to respond with kindness and understanding.

This research used empathy-based stories to uncover participants' perspectives on the impact of empathy on workplace relationships. This paper discusses findings that relate to the way that empathy is expressed in interactions and the likely outcomes empathetic and non-empathetic interactions have on engagement. We begin by exploring the theoretical underpinning of two key concepts, empathy and storytelling.

2. Literature Review

Empathy and storytelling are important concepts underpinning this paper and have been presented within a theoretical framework.

2.1. Empathy

Empathy is a subjective responsive human emotion to the telling (or observing) of another's challenging experience. Empathy is experienced as an "involuntary and unselfconscious merging with another's feelings" (Hsiao et al., 2013, p. 166). Fenichel (1954) suggests that empathy is a shifting seesaw between participating in another's emotional experience and experiencing one's own response to the situation. It refers to a person's "ability to understand the feelings transmitted through verbal and nonverbal messages, to provide emotional support to people when needed, and to understand the links between others' emotions and behavior" (Polychroniou, 2009, p. 345). Empathy is also described as the ability to reach into another's situation to appreciate what they may be thinking and feeling (Baron-Cohen and Wheelwright, 2004; Mayer and Salovey, 1997; Singer et al., 2004). Rogers (2007, p. 243), views empathy as the ability "to sense the other's private world as if it was your own but never losing the "as if" quality."

According to Pecukonis (1990, p. 59), empathy is defined as "a psychological construct regulated by both cognitive and affective components, interacting in a systemic nature to produce emotional understanding". Historically, theorists (Freud, 1959; McDougall, 1908; Sullivan, 1953) have defined empathy as a predominantly affective response mirrored to the emotional behaviors in another. Jacobsen (1964) suggests that empathy is emotional knowledge acquired implicitly through identifying with another's emotional responses.

Empathy has been described as the ability to see the world as others see it with non-judgmental understanding of how another feels (Spiro et al., 1993). According to Grisham (2006, p. 497), empathy creates an intimacy bridge that connects people at an emotional level. Adding to our characterization of empathy, Mullavey-O'Brien (1997) defined empathy as the ability to appreciate others' experiences from their perspective, and to articulate this appreciation to them in a meaningful way, while acknowledging it is authentically their experience. Eisenberg and Strayer (1987, p. 5) view empathy as "an affective response that stems from the apprehension or comprehension of another's emotional state or condition, and that it is similar to what the other person is feeling or would be expected to feel." Empathy as an emotion is not initially focused on self; empathy is for other people to help us experience their emotions. Empathy is usually experienced when we become aware of others experiencing difficult situations that in turn have an emotional influence on us (Gill, 2015).

Empathy is not sympathy, which alternatively prompts emotions of concern or grief (Eisenberg, 2002). Hicks (2016, p. 52) comments that empathy is not pity, which "is when you feel sorry for the other person. The point of empathy is to focus on the other person, see things from their perspective, understand the person's feelings and then communicate that understanding so that the helping relationship is strengthened." There is a connotation to sympathy of feeling for the other person, while experiencing a sense of relief it "is not you;" sympathy does not engender active responsiveness toward the person. Indeed, once sympathy is demonstrated to the sufferer, the "giver" can walk away unencumbered. Thieda (2014) comments on the work of Brene Brown who differentiates between sympathy and empathy, stating that empathy "never starts with the words, "At least...." In her book, *I Thought it Was Just Me (But It Isn't)*, Brown (2008) highlights four attributes of empathy: The ability to see the world as others see it; non-judgmentalism of another's situation; an appreciation for the feelings of the other; and the ability to communicate your understanding of the person's feelings. Further, she notes that experiencing empathy oneself, increases our ability to give empathy, as we "come to better understand the strength and courage it takes to be vulnerable and share that need for empathy in the first place" (p. 31).

Empathy is identified as a key element of emotional intelligence that can be taught (Baillie, 1996; Goleman, 1999; McEnrue et al., 2009; Reynolds and Scott, 1999), though some argue, with difficulty. Interviews with medical students in a study by Austin et al. (2007) showed that female medical students' empathy declined after the 1st year, whereas male medical students' empathy rose and leveled out in subsequent years. While the study did not provide a conclusive explanation, one reason offered was that those who rated highly may have learned to moderate their behavior so as to act effectively around a patient's distress, while low scorers learned to pay more attention to a patient's perspective than previously, which is a skill that is learned over their training. Austin et al. (2007)

concluded that the way empathy was positioned in the training design could result in trainee doctors increasingly demonstrating empathy in practice. Health professional researchers have attempted to develop empathy by offering training programs to improve interpersonal skills, arguing that empathy exists within relational connections and dialogue (Hojat, 2009).

2.2. Storytelling

Stories are an ancient form of depicting history and “bring an element of humanity into the copy” (Wyse, 2016, p. 20). Stories create visual depictions for listeners; they are memorable and create a shared experience between the teller and the listener. The ability to evoke emotions is one of the strengths of a good story (Leung and Fong, 2011). Further, Leung and Fong (2011) emphasize that stories can encourage empathy. Most stories have events and actors and are set in a specific time and location. People make sense through stories, and future possibilities or perceptions can be explored. Ferneley and Sobreperez (2009) suggest that a story has “a beginning, participants, and a concluding event” (p. 123). The listener or receiver of a story identifies with the perspective/s of the participants and so interacts with the story using this perspective to make sense of the experiences in the narrative.

Stories help readers to make sense of their world through their attitudes toward that topic because of three components: Perception of aesthetics, narrative structure, and self-reference (Hsiao et al., 2013). Storytelling can be viewed as a process that adjusts a person’s views and gives them a deeper understanding of the dynamics in play (Heath and Heath, 2011). Brown, as cited in Wyse (2016) states, “Owning our story can be hard but not nearly as difficult as spending our lives running from it. Embracing our vulnerabilities is risky but not nearly as dangerous as giving on love, belonging and joy. Gill’s (2015) research mined the perspectives of 21 emotional intelligence trainers in New Zealand. With respect to the concept of empathy development, the value of using contextualized examples, such that story-telling afforded them ‘voice’; sometimes through personal stories, or another’s real-life story, or a conceptual story such as a case-study that was directly relevant.

According to Wear et al. (1999), narrative invites people into the world the storyteller reveals. Storytelling is also a process of discovery for the storyteller as stories are an important way of passing on “history” and for conveying meaningful experiences (Parrish, 2006). An advantage of storytelling is that stories are engaging in nature (Pillsbury, 2016) and fulfill an explorative function. Writing, reading, telling, or listening to an authentic story encourages empathy (Parrish, 2006). Stories offer different perspectives of events; even the same event. Valuing and revealing counter-narratives exposes readers to non-dominant narratives, progresses societal understanding and empathy (Gair and Moloney, 2013).

Storytelling is a “fundamental way for humans to communicate with each other” (Leung and Fong, 2011, p. 466). Storytelling in an organizational context has been widely used to initiate organizational change, transfer knowledge, develop leaders, and learn from experiences (Auvinen et al., 2013; Leung and Fong, 2011). As a research method, storytelling provides a powerful and effective way to investigate complex behaviors and perceptions (Rooney et al., 2016).

Humans reflect life events through stories. Storytelling could be seen as communication that involves a teller and a passive receiver (Ferneley and Sobreperez, 2009). The view of storytelling as a cooperative activity (McDrury and Alterio, 2002) or an interactive art (Leung and Fong, 2011) views the receiver as an active participant in the process.

Polkinghorne (1998) equates narratives to people’s identities. McDrury and Alterio (2003, p. 10) noted that, “As we tell stories we create opportunities to express views, reveal emotions, and present aspects of our personal and professional lives.” The way the story is told influences the reader’s emotional reaction (Escalas and Stern, 2003). Stories also induce memories of historical personal experiences, which we use to inform and relate to other situations to experience the emotions of the storyteller, whose experience is being articulated (Hsiao et al., 2013).

Mui (2017) relates that a “story is the chief means by which we break down our individual barriers and connect with another person. Stories inherently create empathy and imagination” (para 7). Empathy poses a challenge for people with managerial responsibility. While there may be widespread agreement that empathy is important in relationships, many consider emotions to play a complicating role in work.

The pressure of time and performance may lead people to think that empathy is a luxury. Others may feel that they receive little empathy and support at work, or that the empathy they have for others is not valued. Storytelling may provide a vehicle through which perspectives such as these can be readily expressed.

There are inherent risks in using storytelling as part of research. Auvinen et al. (2013) refer to the “seductiveness of stories” (p. 510) when pointing out that this can lead to misinterpretation and outcomes that are not necessarily intended. Ambiguity and lack of clarity are also noted as risks of utilizing storytelling (Ferneley and Sobrepez, 2009). Stories can contain gender differences, or perceptions of gender differences, and these can lead to interference of interpretation of the findings (Auvinen et al., 2013). While researchers need to be aware of these risks, the benefits of using storytelling to provide insights into human behavior and emotions are convincing (Rooney et al., 2016).

3. Research Methods

The data collection method of empathy-based stories (MEBS) used in this study is of a qualitative nature and is specific to the field of sociology (Parrish, 2006), positioned between surveys and interviews (Juntunen and Saarti, 2000). It is a useful method for examining how a phenomenon is experienced in a particular sample and is particularly useful for exploratory research. Hence, MEBS is a fitting method when the aim is to search for deeper understandings of socio-psychological concepts (Kultalahti and Viitala, 2015).

MEBS is a form of passive role-play, as the storyteller relates their experience through the discourse (Eskola, 1988; Ginsburg, 1979). In this research, participants take on the role of story teller, expanding on scripts provided by the researcher. Participants read a script and then respond by writing a tail-piece or interpretation of the story in answer to a question/s. Each participant is given two scripts describing a workplace interaction and asked to provide answers to questions about the interaction. One script frames the story in a certain way, while the second script frames the same story with one factor of the story changing. For example, the first story might be positively-framed, while the second story is negatively-framed (Juntunen and Saarti, 2000). Scripts need to be reasonably simple, succinct, and in plain language.

Because the participants are responding as a third party, self-awareness is increased and it is easier to answer the questions, even though they are reflecting their “own expectations, values, and perceptions.” MEBS is based on the assumption that people have an understanding of social situations and can translate them into the form of a story in contrast to merely answering researcher questions (Ikonen and Savolainen, 2013).

4. The Process

Participants were drawn from a participant pool of 155 delegates who had attended one of three of the Emotional Intelligence symposiums held between 2012 and 2016 in Dunedin, New Zealand (Gill and Ramsey, 2012; 2014; 2016). They were invited to participate through an email with a link to the survey, to write a tailpiece to the MEBs stories. Fourteen delegates responded to the invitation. While a low response rate of 9.2%, does not invalidate the authentic “voice” of the findings; their interest in EI may mean they have a greater awareness of the role emotions play in interactions than people in general.

4.1. Positive script and negative scripts

Participants were invited through an online Qualtrics website to respond to two stories written from a gender diverse perspective. No prior information about the stories was provided (i.e., they did not know that the stories were deliberately positively and negatively framed) except they would be responding to a couple of questions at the end of it. The two stories presented the same scenario; one was positively-framed and the other, negatively-framed. Here are the two stories:

Story 1: One of the challenges in the workplace today is work-life balance. Jess went to see the manager about the growing number of hours spent at work trying to complete the ever-increasing

work demands on Jess. Jess explained the equally growing demands at home where small children and aging parents were filling up the day. Jess felt that “me-time” was impossible, was tired and becoming overwhelmed by everyone’s expectations. The manager listened attentively, and then offered Jess the option of working 1 day a week from home, with the understanding that Jess could prioritize “family” over work obligations on that day.

Now that you have read the story, please write a tailpiece that reflects on the following two things:

1. How Jess feels about her manager’s response.
2. How Jess feels about the relationship with her manager.

Participants were thanked and introduced to the second story.

Story 2: Jess went to the manager about the growing number of hours spent at work trying to complete the ever-increasing demands on Jess’ time and energy. Jess explained the equally growing demands at home where small children and aging parents were filling up the day. Jess felt that “me-time” was impossible, was tired and becoming overwhelmed by everyone’s expectations. The manager gazed at the computer screen and not at Jess, and seemed disinterested, perhaps angry. The manager’s eyes scanned the piles of folders on the desk and asked Jess what the problem was. “Everyone is busy around here; this is the norm. Are you not coping with it?” The manager continued, “If I do something for you, I’ll have to do something for everyone!”

After reading this story please write a tailpiece that reflects on the following two things:

1. How Jess feels about her manager’s response.
2. How Jess feels about the relationship with her manager.

The responses written from participant perspectives were entered into NVivo 9 enabling the researchers to identify and explore emerging themes inductively. The researchers decided not to “expect” certain empathic responses, but rather to wait and see what specific themes emerged, i.e., through the use of words, stories, or themes that were common across the responses. This process is common within Glaser’s work in grounded theory, which relies on *emergence*; that is, not forced, stipulated or restricted by the researchers’ pre-conceived assumptions (Glaser, 1992).

The researchers looked for commonalities across the themes. Next, these commonalities were explored for systemic unities that would inform the development of models. Models are an effective way of presenting information in a holistic way that shows all of the elements and their dynamic relationships in one place (Kim and Senge, 1994).

We cannot assume that reading or writing stories create empathy in everyone (Gair and Moloney, 2013). Empathy-based stories are aligned to a conversational genre, which does not have clear criterion (Fairclough, 2004). The limitations that relate to the MEBS data collection method are not dissimilar from other qualitative methods, in that they suffer from subjective interpretations in the analysis process, which were mitigated through several rounds of analysis, and employing a team approach when analyzing the data so that multiple perspectives of the data were utilized.

5. Findings

Preliminary analysis of the participant responses revealed some common themes about empathy from the findings, such as (1) listening skills, (2) self-awareness, (3) trust, and (4) a feeling of support.

5.1. Perspectives of the positive script

When asked to describe, “How Jess feels about her manager’s response,” seven participants commented on the lack of listening skills on the manager’s behalf. The participants commented that although the manager attempted, or had the intention to listen attentively, he or she did not grasp the significance of the situation. Here is what some participants had to say about how Jess might have felt about the manager’s listening skills:

That’s very generous, and I acknowledge that you are trying to help, but by “working” at home, and being at the beck and call of family, how am I ever going to catch up on my work?

Jess feels a bit ambivalent. While her manager seemed to act empathetically, s/he proposed a solution rather than listening actively to Jess' concerns and finding out what would be helpful. Jess will feel that it is a bitter-sweet solution. It may resolve some of her home issues but may leave her feeling frustrated and stressed about work.

I don't feel that Jess' Manager got what she was saying. She was telling her Manager that she had small children at home and aging parents to care for too. By giving Jess a day a week to work from home may not help her at all, as she may still have children at home to deal with, meaning that she isn't going to get any further ahead in her work-life balance.

This data are in contrast to five participants who found the manager to be helpful and understood Jess' situation:

Jess might feel that her manager has listened to her situation and is making some effort to make her work-life balance more manageable.

Jess probably also feels that there has at least been an attempt to listen to her problems and that a potential solution has been outlined for her to consider.

Jess would feel relieved about the response – she was pretty stressed but her boss has been an attentive listener and has provided a helpful workaround I believe.

Jess will have appreciated the manner with which his/her [...] listened to the concerns Jess had. The fact the manager offered an option as a response, rather than asking what Jess wanted was interesting.

In summary, the participant responses reflect that Jess felt her manager had the intention to listen and understand the situation, but did not take the entire situation into account, did not act on his or her intention, and so missed vital information. Participants in the research were people actively involved in EI work and their comments regarding a lack of listening on the part of the manager may reflect high personal standards for interpersonal interactions.

When asked to describe how Jess feels about the relationship with the manager, 13 participants suggested that the relationship between Jess and the manager was a positive one, although they also noted that Jess is likely to be displeased with the outcome:

Jess feels positively toward her manager as he tried to come up with an option that might work for both of them and he could see and understand what her issues were.

Appreciative, but that more understanding of the situation on his behalf is necessary.

...Jess must have a reasonably good relationship to feel comfortable in approaching this subject with her or him.

I think that Jess' relationship with her Manager isn't too bad. At least she was able to see her Manager and that they thought enough about her to give her time to see her.

Trust emerged as an important part of a successful relationship and a crucial step in becoming approachable to others which is necessary for empathy to be demonstrated:

Jess may feel he/she has a strong relationship with the manager in which Jess can be vulnerable in sharing life concerns and seek practical solutions, which requires deep trust. On the other hand, Jess may feel the relationship is one-sided if the intention was not to have the issues "solved" but simply to share and be listened to.

Jess considers that her manager is approachable otherwise she would not have gone with her work-life balance problems in the first place.

One participant pointed out the empathy Jess may show towards the manager's skills or situation during their interaction:

...if Jess felt that the solution didn't resolve the issue, she might feel that her manager either doesn't have the skill or the strength to resolve the issue.

Twelve participants raised points regarding the manager's self-awareness of the situation. Although the manager *intended* to listen to Jess and formulate a strategy to assist her; they did not seek clarity of Jess' situation and did not completely understand the implications of the circumstances, that is, the manager did not *demonstrate* empathy:

Probably OK – feels listened to but possibly sees her manager as a bit controlling.

It's good he's trying to find a solution but I'm not sure he's willing to address the amount of work I do.

*...Jess probably feels frustrated as there is ideal solution to her problem and although the Manager did listen, the real problem has not been addressed.
Jess feels positively toward her manager as he tried to come up with an option that might work for both of them and he could see and understand what her issues were.*

Some participants noted that expecting the manager to find a solution to only part of the problem yielded additional consequences. Participants suggested that Jess does not feel supported by the manager:

Amicable but feels inferior to her manager.

...her relationship with her manager might be gratitude followed by resentment.

Not wonderful I would think. If she is worth keeping then she needs to be supported in real time with real solutions and the issues acknowledged.

In summary, the participant responses reflect that Jess does feel some support, and trusts that her manager had the intent to listen and find a solution for her problem. However, due to the perceived lack of self-awareness of the situation, Jess feels some frustration toward the manager due to the lack of understanding and self-awareness of the situation in its entirety.

In evaluating empathy, many of the participants perceived that relationship is a key element of giving and receiving empathy. In addition, empathy must be perceived as authentic to be experienced by the receiver, and empathy will be demonstrated through some form of action.

5.2. Perspectives of the negative script

When analyzing the responses from the negative script, the same four themes emerged: (1) Listening skills, (2) self-awareness, (3) trust, and (4) a feeling of support. When asked to describe, "How does Jess feel about her manager's response," nine participants suggested she likely felt anger or frustration as a result of the manager's lack of interest and self-awareness:

I should imagine that Jess was angry, confused, pissed off and resentful. If Jess had the misfortune to have such a truly cretinous individual for a manager, then she is in the wrong workplace.

Angry, unheard, resentful.

Upset and not listened to. I can't think of a better way to lose the commitment and support of a staff member.

Jess would be extremely frustrated!

I think that she might feel angry, disillusioned. If anything is to change, Jess would need to make it happen.

Jess would be feeling really let down and frustrated. It was probably a huge deal to get the courage to raise the issue, and with a response like this, would be feeling dissatisfaction in her work and unappreciated.

Further, seven participants wrote about the lack of self-awareness of Jess' manager, consequently leading to a lack of understanding and support being conveyed to her. As a result of potentially feeling devalued and unheard, the participants suggested there would be a decline in Jess' job satisfaction and experience feelings of dependency:

She feels even more rubbish, undervalued, and inadequate.

Why do I even bother? He/she doesn't understand.

Really annoyed that he didn't have the courtesy to pay attention to her much less try and engage with her on ways that might address her issues.

Jess would feel that the manager was powerless and did not understand that people have lives outside of work. I think that she might feel angry, disillusioned. If anything is to change, Jess would need to make it happen.

Not properly listened as her manager didn't take her eyes off the screen, like the problem was Jess's fault for not coping, Jess's personal concerns were not recognized as being important to her and she was just one of many rather than being seen as an individual.

She can clearly see that the Manager isn't interested in her work or her sense of well-being. I think Jess would be feeling very disheartened and worried.

He is not understanding and disinterested.

Participants were not specifically asked to observe the level of empathy conveyed by either party, but one participant noted a lack of empathy and self-awareness as to Jess' situation:

Jess would be extremely frustrated! There is no evidence of the Manager demonstrating empathy, understanding, or even trying to show some awareness of what is happening for Jess; in fact, the Manager is very insensitive & lacks key people skills.

Another participant said Jess would have felt confronted and vulnerable as she raised concerns with her manager and was met with unsympathetic or even disinterested comments:

Jess would likely feel frustrated by several factors – the disinterested behavior, inattention to the real concerns and the lack of respect given Jess has proactively raised some genuine concerns. Jess has raised concerns he/she feels (regardless of whether they are experienced by others) yet these have been generalized and watered-down by stating any response would have to apply to “everyone.” Jess may also feel confronted by having his/her competence questioned with regard to “not coping.”

In summary, the survey participants anticipated the likely anger and frustration Jess has experienced as a result of the manager’s disinterest in the situation and the lack of self-awareness or empathy toward Jess. The responses further suggest that Jess likely feels devalued and underappreciated, consequently becoming more dissatisfied in the role resulting in the dissipation of trust toward the manager.

The final question asked participants, “How does Jess feel about the relationship with the manager.” In response, nine participants stated that there was a negative relationship with Jess’ manager which they described in terms of unapproachability, lack of respect, or support:

Jess would not feel that she could approach her Manager for anything personal again.

That there is no support from him that he doesn’t even care about her as a person. In short, there is no relationship.

[Jess] probably doesn’t respect the manager. “No love lost” on this relationship.

Participants also noted that Jess would have felt unvalued or undervalued:

I think that Jess would feel she has no meaningful relationship with her manager. They clearly don’t value her or her contribution to the company. No connection, no relationship, No value, no respect, no love.

Jess likely feels the relationship is purely work-based and dysfunctional. Jess is just a number – not an individual. She likely feels undervalued with regard to her contribution to work and disengaged following this meeting. Trust will have been eroded and she will likely feel she can’t raise any concerns with her manager anymore.

Likely to feel she doesn’t have a relationship at all – just a number.

Undervalued, not listened to, negative!

Not like [a] supporting manager in any way that might be meaningful or cooperative.

Jess feels discouraged, isolated, and disconnected from the Manager’s world – which is one where there is no room for caring, empathy [and] understanding. Jess would not feel that she could approach her Manager for anything personal again.

In summary, emotions that participants highlighted were feeling unvalued or undervalued, which they expressed in terms of objectification, lack of respect, and disconnection, generated predominantly from the manager’s lack of self-awareness.

5.3. Gender specific dialogue

The stories were deliberately written so that non-gender specific names for Jess and the manager were used. Nevertheless, participants frequently referred to Jess as female and the manager as male, reinforcing the assumption of historical roles of authority and power. Only one participant stated explicitly that gender had not been specified. The results are as follows:

While there is not enough data to suggest the manager was perceived as a specific gender, there is evidence that Jess was perceived as female, which may be useful for future research in the perceived gender of a subordinate. Ferneley and Sobreperéz (2009) explain that readers of a story identify easily with the perspective of a participant, leading to associated misconceptions and potential bias and prejudice. In a similar way, identification with a particular gender may have some

Table 1: Gender-specific dialogue

Label	Number of times
Jess referred to as “she” or “her” in relation to “the manager”	7
Jess referred to as “she” or “her,” no mention of the manager	1
The manager referred to as “he, the manager”	1
Jess referred to as “she” in same sentence manager referred to as “he”	1
Jess referred to as “she,” gender of manager not identified.	7

impact on the way the behavior and emotion was perceived. Auvinen et al. (2013) point out that unintended consequences of this type of research can present new insights into human behavior despite this bias (Table 1).

5.4. Models of empathy

The stories suggest that the models of empathy used by participants are as follows:

First, empathy is expressed through listening, rather than simply through solving problems. Interestingly, the first script was framed by the researchers as “positive” and stood in contrast to a script that was clearly worse. Despite that, many of the participants in the research still highlighted the lack of listening in the “positive” script, treating it as “better but not good enough.” This suggests that the connection between empathy and listening is very strong for some people.

Second, people/managers lacking self-awareness may consider themselves to be highly empathetic because they look for solutions. At the same time, they may misread the impact that not listening has on the perception of empathy.

Third, empathy is seen as contributing to feelings of being supported in work. Support is viewed by authors such as Pfeffer (2018) and Amabile and Kramer (2011) as an important contributor to the quality of life of people at work. Reduced support results in feeling stressed and having negative attitudes toward one’s work, colleagues, and organization.

Finally, participants expected that a lack of empathy on the part of the manager and a feeling of not being supported would result in less trust in the relationship and lower levels of engagement on the part of the lead character. Since the lead character (Jess) in the story was named, it seems reasonable to think that participants were most likely to identify with this character rather than the unnamed manager, and thus the emotions described may well indicate how the participants have felt in similar situations.

6. Theoretical and Practitioner Implications

This research has been useful for exploring the utility of developing service workers’ empathy and presents early findings around the emerging themes of self-awareness, authenticity, relationships, trust, and gender perceptions. This seriousness of lack of empathy, or empathy depletion signals the need for intervention, such as empathy training, which in turn will equip people with strategies to facilitate people identifying when and how to express empathy to others, and to maintain a healthy balance of “in” and “out” flow for their own well-being (Gill et al., 2018). The usefulness of storytelling for developing or expressing empathy shows promise. Further research is needed to established greater reliability and validity; however, this research has uncovered useful themes linked to empathy, such as power that could be explored in further studies.

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