



EMPATHY IN TIMES OF CRISIS

S. Panayotova*

Department of Social and Economic Sciences, Faculty of Economics, Technical University – Gabrovo, Gabrovo, Bulgaria

ABSTRACT

This paper presents the specifics of empathy as a quality. People who show empathy can empathize with others, adapt to their colleagues, respond in a timely manner to the problems of loved ones and show sensitivity. This is possible as a result of mirror neurons, the connection between empathy and emotions, as well as reading body language. Empathy is related to emotions, but that doesn't mean taking on the emotional life and opinions of others. In specialized literature, the most commonly used synonyms of the term 'empathy' are: compassion, sympathy, sensitivity, understanding, attention, tenderness. **The purpose** of the author is to study the quality of empathy as a key factor not only for professional career and personal success, but also its application in times of crisis. To achieve the formulated goal the following **research methods** are used: comparison, analysis, interpretation, summary of expert evaluations. The author's **hypothesis** is that the manifestation of empathy helps people to cope with problems even in times of crisis. **The results** of the study are presented in tabular form. **In conclusion** recommendations are provided for the use of empathy and the skills of empathetic people, which help to overcome problems even in times of crisis.

Key words: empathy, ecpathy, types of empathy, skills.

INTRODUCTION

As a result of research, scientists are now convinced that empathy is a key factor in professional career and personal success. There are different approaches to defining the concept of 'empathy'. Most scientific definitions describe empathy as the ability to empathize with other people's thoughts and feelings and to know their cognitive coexistence. Empathy allows us to understand what is happening to other people, but also to respond adequately based on this knowledge. Empathy is related to people's emotions. In order to achieve empathy, the reading of the non-verbal signals of the body and mainly reading the facial expression are used.

The manifestation of empathy is also the result of 'mirror reflection'. The skills of empathetic people are also essential, which contribute to understanding the thoughts, feelings, moods and accurately determining the behavior of other people. The specificity of the quality of empathy can also be applied in times of crisis, helping to overcome people's problems.

The term 'empathy' (English) is translated into Bulgarian as 'compassion' (1). The etymological meaning of the word 'empathy' is 'A person's sympathy for the feelings, perceptions and thoughts of the others, the basis of all positive social relationships' (2). In the Dictionary of Ethics under 'compassion' it reads: 'one of the forms of philanthropy (Humanism); attitude towards other person which is based on the recognition of the legitimacy of their interests and needs' (3). According to the author Daniel Pink, 'Empathy is the ability to place oneself in

*Correspondence to: Assoc. Prof. Svetla Panayotova PhD, Department of Social and Economic Sciences, Faculty of Economics, Technical University – Gabrovo, 4 H. Dimitar Str., 5300 Gabrovo, Bulgaria, e-mail: svetla7561@abv.bg, tel.: +359885843050

another's position and to feel what they are feeling. This is something we do entirely spontaneously, instinctively, and not as a result of a decision' (4). Author Daniele Delle Donne says that *'Empathy also plays an important role in management and marketing. It is needed internally for the organization as a leadership competence, and externally for the design and maintenance of customer relationships'* (5).

METHODS

The formulated goal: *'to study the quality of empathy as a key factor not only for professional career and personal success, but also its application in times of crisis'* is carried out through the selection of specific research methods – comparison, analysis, interpretation and summary of expert assessments.

During the evolution of mankind it has been proven that having the quality of empathy is extremely important. Through empathy self-awareness is built. It contributes to the development of the relationship between parents and children. Empathy creates an opportunity for teamwork in organizations and is a framework for morality. It is important to note that empathy develops during the toddler stage. When a young child sees another child crying, at first he cannot place himself in the other's position. Once empathy develops, the child imitates the other's sadness or pain and can respond adequately to it. When clarifying the concept of 'empathy', the question of 'mirror reflection' is often raised. According to the authors Alan and Barbara Pease *'We reflect each other's body language to establish a connection, to be accepted, to build understanding, but we usually do not realize that we do'* (6).

Characteristic of 'mirror reflection' is that it makes other people feel calm. It is a powerful tool for achieving harmony. As a result of studies conducted on synchronized behavior in body language, the following has been established: people who have similar emotions are very likely to feel harmony with each other. Unconsciously, they begin to copy each other's body language as well as facial expressions. Mirroring is a condition that people are prone to at birth. The ability of people to achieve synchrony with other people originates in the mother's womb, when the

baby's vital functions and heart rate are like those of the mother. The logical question is: do mirror neurons allow empathy? Without going into details, the author of this study gives a brief answer to this question: mirror neurons provide a scientific explanation for the manifestation of empathy. Neurons located in the prefrontal cortex of the brain ensure that people show the same patterns of neural activity when they perform an action or simply observe it in other people. Relative to the level of emotions, this means: neurons are also activated when sensations are perceived by other people. What can be seen is a quasi-mirror, hence its name. It is also necessary to emphasize that empathy is mainly related to emotions. The expression of emotions is nonverbal. The main area of the human body where emotions are expressed is the face. In 1872 Charles Darwin initially scandalized society at the time, claiming that all mammals had emotions. One of the ways they express them is through facial expressions. Later in 1965, psychologist Paul Ekman made an epochal conclusion: facial expressions are universal for all people, regardless of their place of residence. To analyze facial expression, a developed system called Facial Action Coding System (FACS) was used by Paul Ekman and Wallace Friesen (7). The methodology for the study of emotions on facial expression FAST (Facial Affect Scoring Technique), developed by the authors Ekman, Friesen and Tomkins can also be applied to the analysis (8).

According to recent research by the author Waldemar Pelz (9), there are three types of empathy. **Emotional empathy** is also known as emotional sensitivity. It allows people to understand other people's feelings. In addition, it has the characteristics emotional contagion (transfer of mood) and auxiliary impulses. Emotional empathy is an almost 'automatic' response to other people's feelings. Many mothers can pinpoint up to eight different tones of a crying baby. In this way, they recognize his corresponding need instead of interpreting everything as hunger. Attachment however is not a reliable indicator of empathy. The most important characteristic of emotional empathy is that it strengthens unity. This is especially important when it comes to building trusting and well-functioning interpersonal relationships.

Cognitive empathy (rational understanding) is the ability to understand not only the feelings but also the thoughts, intentions and motives of other people in order to be able to judge their future behavior. This includes the ability to correctly decipher indirect or nonverbal signals (body language). For some people, this ‘feeling’ is very underdeveloped. Lack of empathy makes them ‘blind’ to what they can do to other people with their words or actions. **Social empathy** (recognition and control of group dynamics) – due to group dynamics, teams and communities have completely different skills and characteristics, compared to the sum of their individual members. The team could provide services that individuals would not be able to perform. This is especially important for the following reason: in contemporary professional world, most work is done by teams or groups. Without having the ‘feeling’ of how such a system of interpersonal relationships works (group dynamics), one cannot understand it, shape it and control it. Social empathy can be established in the behavior of football teams, staff of organizations or political parties. Practice has shown that the behavior of the team is almost always radically different from the behavior of its individual members. Depending on the point of view, researchers distinguish between empathy and compassion. Empathy is associated primarily with

an appropriate reaction – the ability to respond. While compassion is rather a kind of ‘regret’ for other people’s problems. But there is a risk of emotional exhaustion. In fact, empathy has many components and aspects. This is one of the strongest qualities among a person’s ‘soft skills’.

The term ‘**ecpathy**’ denotes the conceptual opposite of the term ‘empathy’. Therefore, ecpathy is often understood only in a negative sense. In a narrower sense, this does not mean that people are emotionally cold. The most important characteristic of ecpathy is at the same time a useful addition to both self-defense and the protection of other people. People who are very empathetic suffer and take everything very seriously. This can have negative consequences for their mental stability and be used by other people (10). But the concept of ‘ecpathy’ also has advantages. People who do not give in to emotions easily can make better and more rational decisions. This means that people do not engage too much with other people or allow to be manipulated and/or exploited. In many situations ecpathy is more important than originally thought. Politicians, the media and organizations use empathy for manipulative purposes so that it is susceptible to abuse. With the manifestation of ecpathy, people can defend themselves against manipulation.

Table 1. Skills of empathetic people

Skill	Description
They focus on the speaker	They receive all the information from the speaker and remember it better. They are showing a high degree of gratitude to this person.
They read facial expressions	Interpreting facial expressions is crucial to building a real relationship with the other person.
They know body language	They read hand gestures. They know which signals not to use.
Manage stress with conversation	They share, talk about their problems and look for a solution.
They are informed about social relationships	They learn from their colleagues. They are curious about the decisions of other experts.
They tell good stories, which are remembered	They use language images and emphasize the connecting elements.
They can deal with their emotions	They have the ability to control their emotions. They are aware of themselves and know when to avoid difficult conversations.
They have a positive attitude towards work	They smile. They do not participate in gossip. They know that positive attitudes shape the day and do not succumb to failures.
They make good compliments	Good compliments improve relationships with employees and make it easier to ask for help.
They listen carefully when there is a conflict	They resolve conflicts by listening actively and asking questions about understanding.
They know how and when to encourage people	They have the right sense of when other people will be motivated in the workplace.
They build lasting relationships	They invest time and interest in other people. They would ask for help only after a personal interview and a series of meetings.
They doubt their feelings	They use methods of reflection to understand their feelings.

An in-depth analysis of the skills of empathetic people has been performed by a number of authors. The analyses of individual authors (11-14) summarize specific skills in the present study, without underestimation of other opinions. The author Daniel Pötzsch shares that *‘Empathetic people have an above average understanding of people and their emotions’* (15). According to author Jochen Mai, *‘What colleagues, bosses, customers, employees or business partners experience and think or what intentions they pursue is rarely obvious. But if you find out faster, you not only have an advantage. This immediately makes these people more pleasant. It seems that they already know each other well and ensure harmony with each other’* (16). The specific skills that empathetic people show are presented in **Table 1**.

A prerequisite for the manifestation of empathy is not only the knowledge of people, but also the real self-perception. The more open people are to their emotions and the better they understand themselves, the better they can interpret and deal with other people’s feelings. The process of empathy consists of four stages, the so called **four pillars of empathy**. Each pillar of empathy contains a basic question and forms of

expression. **The first pillar** is related to **the perception** of the interlocutor. The main question is: ‘How does the other person feel?’ Forms of expression: gestures, facial expressions, body language, voice, statements, noticeable emotions. **The second pillar** refers to **the understanding** of the expressed feelings of the interlocutor. The main question is: ‘Why does the interlocutor feel this way?’ Forms of expression: reasons, motives, circumstances. **The third pillar** includes **the resonance** (consideration of the answer) to the interlocutor. The main question is: ‘How to react to the expressed feelings of the interlocutor?’ Forms of expression: reflection, words, actions, sympathy, acceptance. **The fourth pillar** concerns **the expectation** of the interlocutor’s response. The main question is: ‘How will the other person react to the answer?’ Forms of expression: emotional, rational. Despite the separate interpretation of the four pillars of empathy, there is a mutual conditionality between them. The implementation of each pillar with an answer to the main question and analysis of the forms of manifestation is a prerequisite for the next stage. Schematically, the four pillars of empathy and their interdependence are presented in **Figure 1**.

THE FOUR PILLARS OF EMPATHY



Figure 1. The four pillars of empathy and their interdependence
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RESULTS

As a result of the analysis of the skills of empathic people, each person could test their quality of

empathy by answering the questions formulated in **Table 2**.

Table 2. *Questionnaire 'Do you show empathy towards other people?'*

№	Opportunities for empathy towards other people	Yes	No
1.	I can immediately recognize the mood in a room.		
2.	When someone cries, I am also very upset and sad.		
3.	I understand even what is said between the lines.		
4.	When I have the opportunity, I always try to help other people.		
5.	I try to please other people as best I can to avoid conflict situations.		
6.	Another person's joy is good for me and makes me smile.		
7.	If there is a dispute, I try to maintain neutrality and find a solution for everyone.		
8.	I can keep a secret very well because I know how important it is for other people.		
9.	It burdens me when people around me suffer or when they are treated unfairly.		
10.	I can understand well what makes it difficult for other people.		
11.	I notice changes in body language and I can recognize them.		
12.	I have desires and goals, but also have a very clear perception of other people's needs.		
13.	Many people trust me.		
14.	I know immediately when someone tries to deceive me.		
15.	My friends and colleagues appreciate that I am a good listener.		

The Covid-19 crisis has had a negative impact not only on many sectors of the country's economy globally. Stricter measures, limited contact and distance, less freedom, a large number of illnesses and deaths have led to health and social problems – domestic violence, child pornography, mental illness, and suicide. If at the end of 2020 people hoped that the worst in the battle against Covid-19 would soon end, now they will have to endure some form of restrictions for the foreseeable future. The fact is that the number of infections and deaths is gradually decreasing and the number of vaccinated citizens is increasing. But still the inability to predict the consequences of the pandemic and its end leads to uncertainty not only for citizens but also for organizations. In view of this, more and more questions are being asked: should it really be so; how long it will last in time; is there no alternative; should people tolerate any new measures as well? All questions are legitimate and require an immediate answer.

As a result of the prolonged pandemic situation in the foreground, the need for empathy towards the victims and people left in isolation for a long time increases. Despite the digitalization of the modern society and widespread access to the global network, qualities that are more difficult to imitate are now becoming increasingly valuable.

One of these qualities that computers cannot reproduce is empathy. The expression of empathy is not only a key factor for professional career and personal success, but it is also a means of understanding other human beings even in times of crisis. Empathy is a universal language through which people connect beyond geographical boundaries and regardless of their cultural background. Through empathy and in times of crisis, people become more humane.

CONCLUSION

As a result of the research methods used in this study, the following conclusions can be formulated:

1. People's thoughts, feelings and intentions are rarely obvious. Only empathy can help here – the ability to understand the behavior of other people or a team and to accurately predict the reaction.
2. Since the manifestation of empathy is dependent on emotions, and they are expressed nonverbally, in order for people to be empathetic, they must look at other people's faces.
3. It is necessary to distinguish between emotional, cognitive and social empathy. Although considered separately, the three species complement and overlap.
4. The quality of empathy can be acquired and trained. Some people master this quality very

well, while others only moderately. The most important rule is that people always stay calm. Not to react immediately, but to observe and analyze objectively and critically.

5. Empathetic people can correctly interpret the gestures, facial expressions, body posture and tone of voice of their interlocutors and draw conclusions about their behavior. Empathy transcends pure passive compassion or understanding. For this reason, it is one of the key factors for career, professional and personal success.

6. Sometimes empathy can also be used to manipulate the media, advertising, politicians. That's why it's important to know how empathy 'works' in practice.

7. In the current conditions of globalization and the existence of the Covid-19 pandemic, the manifestation of the quality empathy is a key factor not only for professional career and personal success, but also helps to overcome the problems that have arisen in people and in times of crisis.

8. The results of the analysis confirm the hypothesis of the author of this study that the manifestation of empathy helps people to cope with problems even in times of crisis.

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