Empathy-Focused Learning: Can Empathy be Taught?
Dr. Linda Keena
Department of Legal Studies – The University of Mississippi

PURPOSE and RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. The purpose of this study was to examine to what extent a criminal justice course can enhance or foster empathy.

The research questions guiding this study were:
1. What are the measurable effects of an empathy-focused learning project on the students’ empathy levels?
2. What are the perceptions of the participating students regarding the impact of the empathy-focused learning projects on students’ empathy?
3. Are there measurable effects of an empathy-focused learning project on students who were required to take the course and those who self-selected the course?

Empathy-Focused Projects

- **INTERVENTION GROUP:**
  - Students enrolled in the course from Fall Semester 2007-2010 were assigned empathy-focused projects to supplement the traditional course requirements
  - N=76

- **CONTROL GROUP:**
  - Students who enrolled in the course in Fall Semesters 2011-2014 were not assigned the empathy-focused projects
  - N=112

METHODOLOGY

- This mixed-method designed study utilized a two-stage measurement technique
- Students in both the control and intervention groups were asked to complete a pre- and posttest survey, the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI) instrument
- At the end of the semesters, only students in the intervention group were invited to participate in semi-structured, face-to-face interviews. An interview guide was used so that each participant was asked the same set of questions to make comparisons across interviews

RESULTS

Table 1: Mean Scores, Observed t Values, Correlations, and Percentage of Differences on Dimensions of Empathy at Pre- and Posttest (Intervention and Control Groups)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subscale</th>
<th>Percent (N)</th>
<th>Mean (M)</th>
<th>Observed Value (pre to posttest)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Have concerned feelings for the less fortunate | Intervention * (n=76) | 3.40 | 2.67 | -17.648 .705
|                                       | Control * (n=112)  | 3.32 | 3.10 | 8 -4.094 .677
| Full participation for others having problems | Intervention * (n=76) | 2.79 | 2.81 | -0.939 .461
|                                       | Control * (n=112)  | 2.78 | 3.10 | 10 -4.584 .683
| Feel for others being taken advantage | Intervention * (n=76) | 2.57 | 2.57 | 11.263 .705
|                                       | Control * (n=112)  | 2.58 | 3.01 | 10 -1.712 .705
| Feel for others otherwise unfortunates | Intervention * (n=76) | 2.76 | 2.76 | -22.550 .536
|                                       | Control * (n=112)  | 2.76 | 3.01 | 10 -3.757 .627
| Feel for those being treated unfairly | Intervention * (n=76) | 2.78 | 2.76 | -10.406 .446
|                                       | Control * (n=112)  | 2.76 | 2.96 | 7 -2.382 .754
| Feel for those being treated unfairly observed | Intervention * (n=76) | 2.58 | 2.69 | -10.522 .523
|                                       | Control * (n=112)  | 2.69 | 3.02 | 12 -7.400 .833
| Feel for those being treated unfairly observed self-observed | Intervention * (n=76) | 2.82 | 2.57 | -10.454 .496
|                                       | Control * (n=112)  | 2.82 | 3.03 | 18 -9.652 .753

* Significant at p<0.01

Questions from participants:

“I did feel for those less fortunate than myself. I realized how sad it is to not have any family support. I met this one man who had been released from prison, they sent him to a retirement home to live. I felt such compassion for him because he absolutely had no place to go or no one who cared about him.”

“Never considered myself a soft-hearted person. But, I learned as long as a person seems to care about what is happening to them then I will care. I discovered that I was more giving and kinder than I thought.”

An average of 19 intervention students were present each semester when the pre- and posttests were administered. The control group averaged 37 students present each semester the pre- and posttests were administered.

In order to discern the measurable effects of empathy-focused learning projects on students’ empathy levels, a Paired Two-Sample Means t-test was computed on the IRI pre- and posttest data to measure change in the students’ perceived empathy.

While there was a positive change in all the subscales for both groups, there was a larger increase from students in the intervention group.

The observed t-value indicates a significant change (p<0.01) from pre-to posttest measures of empathy for all seven subscales in the intervention group and for six of the seven subscales in the control group.

The qualitative data supported the quantitative statistics in illustrating the students’ changing empathy.

QUOTES FROM PARTICIPANTS

Table 2: Mean Scores and Percentage of Differences on Dimensions of Empathy by Intervention Group (Intervention and Control Groups)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Intervention * (n=76)</th>
<th>Control * (n=112)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Feel for others having problems</td>
<td>2.79/2.81</td>
<td>2.78/3.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feel for others being taken advantage</td>
<td>2.57/2.57</td>
<td>2.58/3.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feel for others otherwise unfortunates</td>
<td>2.76/2.76</td>
<td>2.76/3.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feel for those being treated unfairly</td>
<td>2.78/2.76</td>
<td>2.76/2.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feel for those being treated unfairly observed</td>
<td>2.58/2.69</td>
<td>2.69/3.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feel for those being treated unfairly observed self-observed</td>
<td>2.82/2.57</td>
<td>2.82/3.03</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Significant at p<0.01