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Becoming a More Empathetic Leader and Person

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Honors Thesis Approval Page

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Title of Thesis: Becoming a More Empathetic Leader and Person

Accepted by the Honors Program and faculty of the Department of Leadership Studies,
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Arts.

FACULTY APPROVAL

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5/19/2022
Date

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Honors Program Director

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Date

Becoming a More Empathetic Leader and Person

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty and the Honors Program
Of the University of San Diego

By
Rachel Shellstrom
Leadership Studies
2022

Abstract

When defining empathy, the most common definition is “stepping into someone else’s shoes.” Along with this definition, many also share that it is important to have empathy and be an empathetic person. Yet, when thinking about its importance and this definition, a few questions arise: can we *actually* step into someone else’s shoes? Can we truly understand what someone else is feeling and experiencing if we are not them or do not hold the same identities that they do? Through a deeper exploration of existing empathy building certificate programs and empathy research, this thesis project explores these exact questions and finds ways that we can strengthen our empathy by utilizing certain practices and activities. In addition to investigating and looking into existing methods, this project offers new ideas and a new empathy building certificate program. This new program will be the first of its kind and aims to help our society get closer to understanding what someone of different identities, other than their own, feels like and experiences. Not only is this program important in helping us all be better people but better leaders, which is exceptionally important for those in positions of power, who are making decisions on behalf of others, and for White-identifying folks.

Acknowledgment

First and foremost, I want to acknowledge that the land that I am living and learning on is the traditional and unceded territory of the Kumeyaay nation. I want to pay respect to the citizens of the Kumeyaay Nation, both past and present, and their continuing relationship to their ancestral land. As stated by John Saltmarsh of the Epistemic Justice Project team, I begin with this land acknowledgment because it is important for me and all of us to “acknowledge the historical legacy of colonialism by honoring and paying respect to the land, which was taken by conquest, along with the domination of the people who inhabited the land, and the imposition of white supremacy. We do it to raise greater public consciousness of Native sovereignty and cultural rights as a small step toward equitable relationship, and reparation.” I encourage you to find out who’s land you are on and seek out ways to educate yourself beyond this land acknowledgment. I want to emphasize that land acknowledgments are important but they are only the first steps towards repairing the harm that was brought on by settler colonialism.

Second, I want to acknowledge that in my thesis, I am sharing and highlighting the experiences of marginalized communities. Because of the work that this thesis is asking people to engage in, some of the stories and experiences that are shared might be traumatic and cause one to feel activated, especially if this someone is part of the community and has been near or involved in similar situations. If this resonates with you and your experience at any time, please take a step back and know that because those examples are your lived experience, this is not your work and it is not required for you to continue reading. As I will talk about further in the paper, when it is our own lived experience, it is more likely that you will be able to empathize with that same community because you are already aware of those feelings. In addition to this content

warning and acknowledging who's work this is, I want to pay my respect to these communities and say that I see you, I am listening to you, and I value you.

Additionally, it is essential for me to recognize my positionality and social location in relation to this work. I am a heterosexual woman, who is both Mexican and White, able-bodied, raised by a single mom for most of my life, and an only child. Within my immediate family, I am the first to go straight into a four-year university since my dad did not graduate highschool and my mom eventually went to community college then got her teaching credential. For most of my life, my dad has been a fieldworker and still farms to this day. I have grown up in a small town near the U.S.-Mexico border and have lived there all my life. While there are other experiences and identities that I hold, these are the most salient to me and the ones that show up most in the way I live my life. My intersection of identities and experiences render me privileged, especially since I am white-passing in my looks and name. Not only am I privileged for these reasons but it is a privilege for me to be writing this thesis and to be the one who is having to educate rather than live in these experiences. I acknowledge my positionality and social location, both informed by my privileged and marginalized identities, because I intend to utilize them to speak up for the marginalized communities I am part of and for the ones I am not. This will be something that is done through this thesis project which will also include me using my position to encourage other privileged folks to do the same.

Please note that the next section contains details about a situation that include police brutality and a physical attack on someone due to their ability and race

Introduction, Background & Purpose

Over the summer of 2021, I was part of a week-long student leadership conference that included one day that was full of workshops that we could choose from. The workshop that I selected was interactive and asked the participants to read a script that was a true story. We each volunteered for different roles and when no one volunteered to be the main character, I raised my hand. Then, we began reading the script and role-playing.

While I had no knowledge of the script's story beforehand, I soon realized that it was based on a situation in which a Black, deaf man was pulled over by the police and brutally beaten. This role was based on the real life story of Pearl Pearson that was in the news in January 2014 (Lohr, 2014). Pearson went to grab a card that explained his inability to hear and the police thought that he might be grabbing a weapon. Since I was in the main character role, I was placed into the man's shoes just by reading his part. As we went through the script-reading, which took about a half-hour, I felt myself going through different emotions of anger, frustration, sadness, etc. I felt so immersed in the script, as if it was me in the situation.

After the workshop was over, I remember reflecting on this experience and felt transformed and enlightened in ways that I have not before. As a person whose intersection is privileged and different from the intersection of a Black, deaf man, I have never known and will probably never know what it is like to feel threatened by the police or worried about my life if I got pulled over. I have been beyond privileged to see being pulled over as an inconvenience or a bump along the road. Due to this reflection, I realized that what I had just experienced was a true moment of empathy and actually immersed myself into the experience and emotions of another person. I instantly felt the need to share this moment of transformation with my peers, especially those who have never experienced marginalization.

In my process of thinking how to share the experience and allow for others to be transformed in a similar way, I evaluated my existing empathy and how it has developed. The communities and individuals that I have the most empathy for are those who I personally identify with: single moms, only children, Mexican-Americans, farmworkers and fieldworkers, biracial-identifying and White folks. These are the identities and experiences that are most salient to me, as I mentioned previously, and I am always ready to go to battle for these groups because of the empathy I have for them which makes their struggles my own. Next, I would say that I have high amounts of empathy for the communities that I have engaged in conversation with, heard their stories and have friendships with. But, I realize that not everyone is as adept at seeking out these sorts of experiences and friendships that immerse them in experiences other than their own lived one.

These thoughts and reflections eventually led me to decide to research existing empathy building programs, activities and practices in hopes of proposing my own empathy building certificate program that could be implemented practically anywhere but especially at my current institution, the University of San Diego. In connection to the script-reading activity that had a tremendous impact on my empathy as well as my own existing empathy, I have a new grasp of how empathy can make issues and the struggles of others outside our communities feel personal. Furthermore, I have witnessed how deeply impactful it can be when we open ourselves up to the experiences and stories of others, which is unfortunately not always common. As shared in an article created by individuals at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, “People are inclined to feel more empathy for those who are similar to them or in close proximity to them. But when it comes to building a school community and developing caring students, that’s not enough. In strong school communities, students (and adults) have empathy for everyone – including those

who are different in background, beliefs, or other ways" (Jones, Weissbourd, Bouffard, Kahn, and Anderson, 2018). Because we are inclined to stay within our comfort zones and feel more empathy for those who are similar to us as well as closer in proximity, there is an even greater need for empathy building programs and research that push people to empathize with other identities, experiences and communities. Thus, the purpose of my study is to get people out of their comfort zones and involved in activities that are building their empathy to be a strong part of their skillset.

Moreover, this work is critical for the privileged, particularly my fellow White and white-passing friends. Due to the fact that many of the marginalized communities are the ones we need to build more empathy for because we do not have those lived experiences, the ball is in our court and it is time to do the work. That being said, this is a call to action. Not only to everyone who interacts with my thesis, but for myself as well, since this work is equally mine. If we are to call ourselves "allies," we must engage in empathy building so that the issues of marginalized communities feel personal and part of our own struggle. This is our work, not theirs. To be part of this is to show up, step out of our comfort zones, lean into discomfort and proclaim that we are active allies, not performative. We must be in it together and willing to battle alongside each other. As John Steinbeck states, "You can only understand people if you feel them in yourself" (Says, 2021). And with that being said, I invite you to be brave and to be empathetic. This is how we are going to dismantle systems of oppression.

Throughout this thesis, I hope to develop a deep understanding of empathy and its importance. This will lead me into also considering the potential impacts of empathy, meaning if someone is more empathetic, how this will impact their life and those around them. Furthermore, I hope to investigate how an individual can build their empathy to be part of their skillset and

why this is beneficial to not only that individual but everyone that surrounds them including their community and larger society. In this extensive literature review I will examine empathy as it relates to developing future leaders. The research questions that will guide this exploration are: Why is empathy important? What are the potential impacts of empathy on people and communities? Can empathy be learned and if so, what are the processes, practices or curriculum that can be developed for this purpose?

Literature Review

Different Types of Empathy

While the term “empathy” is usually used in a broad sense, there are three different types of empathy: cognitive, emotional and compassionate. The first two types, cognitive and emotional, through my research, seem to be most popular and most commonly known. In a journal called “The Role of Empathy in Improving Intergroup Relations,” by Walter Stephan and Krystina Finlay, cognitive empathy “...refers primarily to taking the perspective of another person...” and emotional empathy is defined as “...emotional responses to another that either are similar to those the other person is experiencing or are a reaction to the emotional experiences of the other person” (p. 730, 1999). With this explanation of these types of empathy, we can better understand that empathy is multilayered and our empathy does not always show up in the same way. Similar to these definitions, Daniel Goleman defines cognitive empathy as “simply knowing how the other person feels and what they might be thinking” and mentions the pitfall to this type of empathy is that it can hinder us from being deeply connected to the other person and putting ourselves in their shoes (Baker, 2021). Goleman defines emotional empathy to be cognitive empathy but with the addition of feeling deeply and really putting ourselves in

someone else's shoes. He describes that it is "when you feel physically along with the other person, as though their emotions were contagious" (Baker, 2021). And while this type of empathy allows us to be deeply understanding of the person, Goleman notes that the pitfall of this kind of empathy is that it can be overwhelming, since we are taking on someone's emotions that might not always be happy.

The third type of empathy, compassionate empathy, is when "we not only understand a person's predicament and feel with them, but are spontaneously moved to help, if needed" (Baker, 2021). In comparison to the other types of empathy, compassionate empathy seems to be a mixture of the two with an added layer of wanting to take action and offer support. Having compassionate empathy is beneficial because it allows us to consider the whole person and "goes beyond merely understanding others and sharing their feelings" (Baker, 2021). In my own project and empathy building program proposal, compassionate empathy resonates the most with my goals and own experience with empathy in comparison to the other two types. Not only does it encompass knowing how the other person feels and feeling alongside them, but this type of empathy puts that understanding and feeling into action. When I did the script reading activity and felt inclined to start this project to take further action, I had compassionate empathy and now hope to cultivate it within others as well.

Understanding the different types of empathy allows us to evaluate how we are reacting to other's feelings, thoughts and emotions, and each of the different types have their own benefits and disadvantages. And although this research on empathy types is important to mention, especially at the beginning of my paper, I will not go in depth beyond this section of my literature review because it is beyond both the scope and purpose of my paper.

Importance of Empathy for Leadership

Before taking a look at existing research on the importance of empathy for people and leaders, I first want to give context to what “leadership” means. Oftentimes, when the word “leadership” is heard, we think of people in positions of power and authority like the President, Queen Elizabeth, or maybe even our own supervisors and those of higher positions within our own organizations. Yet, it is important to make a distinction and recognize that leadership is an action or “a process rather than defined only by specific individuals who exercised influence and authority” (Komives and Wagner, p. 7, 2017). In fact, it is an action that everyone has the ability to enact and all of us have enacted leadership in different ways, even if we did not know it was leadership at the time. In connection with the title of this section, “Importance of Empathy for Leadership,” defining leadership in this way recognizes that we all have the ability to influence, take up leadership, and make change within our community. In relation to empathy, we all have the capacity to be empathetic and have it be the backbone to our leadership. We must no longer think that leadership is only in the hands of those with titles and positions of power but rather in our very own hands instead. And, when we enact empathetic leadership, we are not only empowering ourselves but cultivating many other benefits that have positive effects on our communities and those around us.

Due to its recent popularity, there are many resources that can be found on empathy, what it is, why it is important and its potential impacts. During my search through existing literature, a source within the Journal of Leadership Education called, “Building Leadership Skills Through High-Impact Experiences” stood out to me because of how the authors defined empathy to be “understanding another person’s experience by imagining oneself in that experience as if it were being experienced by someone else... Empathy enables other interpersonal skills and is requisite

for the skills identified as most important by Zenger and Folkman (2009), including inspire and motivate others, build relationships and communicate powerfully” (Andreu, Carter, Sweet, p. 135, 2020). The journal goes on to add that there are many other positive benefits of being genuinely concerned for others, also known as being empathetic. Similarly, an article on the Center for Creative Leadership’s website describes empathy as the “ability to perceive and relate to the thoughts, emotions, or experiences of others. Those with high levels of empathy are skilled at understanding a situation from another person’s perspective and reacting with compassion” (Leading Effectively Staff, 2020). While these are just two of the many resources in which empathy is defined, these provide a holistic understanding of empathy to be multifaceted, selfless, and interpersonal. When we are being empathetic, according to these definitions, we are letting go of our own desires and wishes and being more than ourselves. In my own experience with empathy that I shared earlier, this is exactly what I felt and hope for others to experience too.

While searching for research on empathy, there are many resources available from all kinds of sources and different perspectives. There are articles and journals on empathy created by individuals in the healthcare, educational, professional field, etc., proving that empathy is universal, central to serving others and a key component of all areas. Published in the *Permanente Journal*, “An Overview of Empathy” by James T. Hardee, MD, describes the importance of empathy within clinician-patient relationships. “If empathy is properly used in this setting, the patient is honored, communication is effective and information is gathered efficiently due to a deeper understanding between the clinician and patient” (Hardee, p. 51-54, 2003). Beyond the healthcare field, empathy in an educational setting has the potential to improve classroom management, promote higher academic achievement, better communication skills,

lower the likelihood of bullying, decrease aggressive behaviors and emotional disorders, and lastly, create more positive relationships (Jones, Weissbourd, Bouffard, Kahn, and Anderson, 2018). In a professional setting, empathy is positively related to job performance and those who are more empathetic are viewed as better performers in their jobs by their supervisors (Leading Effectively Staff, 2020). Furthermore, each of these pieces emphasizes the importance of empathy in all places where people are involved. From healthcare to education to the workplace and beyond, empathy is important to being relational and effective in tasks.

The importance of empathy was not only articulated in these perspective-specific resources, but there are other sources that provide a general overview of how empathy is important to cultivating a healthy society. For example, Ashoka's Initiatives in Empathy and Young Changemaking describes that "impactful collaboration in such a world is only possible with empathy..." and empathy to be as fundamental as reading, writing and math in a changemaking world (n.d.). This proves that empathy is key to making positive change and is as crucial as other skills that are implemented in classrooms. In connection with my own research and experience, Ashoka's statement echoes my call for more practices, activities and programs in which people are building their empathy to be a strong part of their skillset.

Within the chapter, "Activate Empathy," of Donna Hicks's book, *How to Create a Culture That Brings Out the Best in People*, the importance of being empathetic for the sake of our relationships and being kinder people is reflected. Hicks utilizes the thoughts of Daniel Goleman who "makes the point throughout that without empathy, relationships suffer. Empathy inhibits cruelty towards others. Without our capacity for empathy, the human experience of relationships would not be a natural source of comfort and safety, but potentially a source of threat and harm" (Hicks, p. 101, 2018). This part of the chapter emphasizes empathy's

connection to successful relationships that are comfortable and safe spaces for those involved. Empathy allows for such a deep connection and understanding of the other person that cruelty, threat, and harm are out of the question. Along the same line, Hicks adds that “empathizing with others is experiencing their situation, not yours,” (p. 102) meaning that empathy is a selfless act that requires us to step out of our own bubble and into someone else’s. If we are able to do this, we can become better community members and better allies to our peers.

On my journey of discovering resources that assessed the importance of empathy and what it can do for others and oneself, I came across some that specified groups who are lacking empathy the most. According to the “Activate Empathy” chapter, those with more power tend to empathize less and it appears to be because there is less incentive to interact with others when in high positions of power (Hicks, p. 104, 2018). In connection to my introduction, this research makes sense, especially since we are most likely to feel more empathy toward those in close proximity and toward those who are most similar to us (Jones, Weissbourd, Bouffard, Kahn, and Anderson, 2018). Those in high positions of power, at least in American society, tend to be wealthy, White and male. Therefore, these powerful men are not exposed to those facing marginalization because of this power distance and according to this research, will suffer to empathize with and understand the needs of those that are not as privileged. Because those in high positions of power have the most control over decision making in our society, it is likely that due to the lack of empathy for those being marginalized, the decisions made by these individuals will not benefit those who need the support most. This is why it is most important for highly powerful and privileged individuals to engage in empathy building work, like the program I hope to create.

Existing Empathy Practices, Activities, and Suggestions

In the pursuit of becoming a more empathetic person and leader, the most convenient, accessible and cheapest approach is to search on the internet for resources on empathy and how to become more empathetic. Through my own search for existing empathy building programs, practices and activities, I found mixed results. In regards to practices and activities, I found short articles that were commonly titled like “5 steps to become more empathetic.” Between the current practices, activities, and programs that currently exist, there are similarities and differences, strengths and weaknesses.

In a simple Google search, one might come across an article like Minter Dial’s “Five Everyday Exercises for Building Empathy” or Claire Cain Miller’s New York Times article, “How to Be More Empathetic.” These are just two examples of articles that mirror the many that can be found through Google. When comparing these two articles, they are similar in how they introduce empathy, making sure to address its importance. Something that especially stood out to me is that both articles explicitly state in their introductions that there is an “...empathy deficit and it’s at the root of many of our biggest problems” (Miller, n.d.). This component of their introductions is important as it sets the foundation for the information they are going to offer.

Not only are their introductions similar but their pieces of advice for building empathy run parallel to one another. One way of building empathy that caught my attention is how both articles stress the need to read more fiction. Dial explains that this kind of “literature exposes you to the intricacies and inner workings of complex characters you don’t get to ‘meet’ otherwise... Fiction apparently tricks our minds into thinking we are part of the story, and the empathy we feel for characters wires our brains to have the same sensitivity towards real people” (Dial, 2019). In Miller’s article, the same reason for reading fiction is shared and described as being a

way for people to increase their “...capacity to understand other people’s thoughts and feelings...” (n.d.).

As I give it more thought, the concept of reading fiction as a way for people to build their empathy makes sense and encourages me to reflect on when I have read fiction or watched a fictional movie. Most of the time I get completely invested in the characters, their lives and passions, and I end up crying when the book or movie is over because I am thinking about, “what if this happened to me?” Additionally, fiction might be a more fun and less daunting way for others to get involved in this work. Many enjoy simply reading fictional stories for leisure and pleasure, making it a plus if readers are building their empathy at the same time. Because of this, fictional reading may be less daunting for some in comparison to some of the other options that require more steps and a push to adventure outside of the comfort zone. Therefore, fictional reading might be a good starting point for an empathy program, something that I will definitely consider when constructing my own program.

Beyond the similarities of acknowledging an empathy deficiency and the importance of reading fiction, another commonality that I noticed between the articles by Miller and Dial has repeatedly shown up in other similar articles as well. This commonality is cultivating empathy through the art of active listening and each article that I reviewed had different tips for how we can enact active listening. An article by Donna Wilson and Marcus Conyers breaks down listening into “HEAR,” which consists of halt, engage, anticipate, replay. Halt means to stop whatever you are doing, engage means to focus and engage with what the speaker is saying, anticipate means to look forward to what they will say, and lastly, replay is to think about what they are saying while replaying and dialoguing the information in your mind (Wilson and Conyers, 2017). Likewise, Dial mentions that listening actively can be practiced by

“reformulating the message to the person who just said it” (2019) and suggests that one begins practicing this in situations where there is low-risk such as when you check out at the grocery store. Miller agrees with these points and adds, “truly listening to someone requires active engagement,” including using our body language to show we are listening, putting away our phones, paying attention to facial expressions, and more (n.d.).

Each of these tips and tricks for being more empathetic through active listening, are critical to having empathy for others and the stories that they choose to share. If we are not actively listening, we may be relaying an implicit message that says we do not genuinely care for what the other person has to say. In any empathy work, I believe that listening practice should be one of the starting points since it lays the foundation for so many other things. Especially for White and White-passing individuals, like myself, it is important that we not only become better at listening but “learn to be quiet” (Miller, n.d.). Personally, this is an area where I have struggled because I am someone who feels comfortable taking up space and have been given the space to speak more times than not, due to my privileged identities. Yet, in order to become a more empathetic person and better ally, it is crucial to be quiet, listen and give the space back to those who do not have the same privileges and opportunities to share. But, I do want to stress that this by no means gives permission or encourages White silence.

While on the subject of becoming more empathetic through being quiet and actively listening, I want to mention one last article that has a similar layout to the others and mirrors the “5 easy ways to be empathetic” style. “How to be More Empathetic,” by Lilianna Hogan, once again lays out steps that people can engage in to be more empathetic and also mentions listening as one of the ways. However, Hogan suggests that along with listening, it is important to share because, “empathy is not just about having empathy for others but also about showing ourselves

to others” (2021). In reaction to this aspect of the article, I feel mixed emotions and think that this component of building empathy is not always essential and is situational. As I talked about previously, depending on your own identity, it is important to be quiet and solely listen, especially if you are privileged. When wanting others to be empathetic towards you, sharing is important, but for the purposes of my project and the program I hope to create, we are doing the work in order to build empathy for those who have different intersecting identities and experiences than our own. Therefore, in my own program, this component that is mentioned in Hogan’s article will not be the main focus and rather, an aspect of the program that is used for creating a comfortable space between participants in which they can find meaningful connections between themselves and within the activities.

While there are many other accessible articles on empathy that can be found through browsing the internet, the ones that were selected to look further into are representative of many of the others and illustrate a theme that is noticeable among them all. The theme of simplicity is present among the articles, making them more accessible to a general audience and more easily understood. This way of compiling empathy research and empathy building practices is good for those just starting out or curious about what empathy means. Yet, in my own opinion and in connection to my own research, these articles are too simple and do not have an aspect of accountability in which people are put on the spot to commit and engage in the activities suggested.

Out of all the articles examined, the one that does the best job at being in the middle between passive and active is “How to Be More Empathetic.” The steps laid out in this piece are actionable and actually give readers instructions for how they can do the steps. For example, the first way to build empathy that is discussed in Miller’s piece is to “Talk to new people” (n.d.).

Underneath the explanation is a section called, “try it,” which details, “start conversations with strangers or invite a colleague or neighbor you don’t know well to lunch. Go beyond small talk... Follow people on social media with different backgrounds than you (different race, religion, or political persuasion)” (Miller, n.d.). Other ways that Miller suggests for us to do to become more empathetic include attending religious services that are different from our own, challenging yourself to think about the “why” behind someone’s feelings, volunteering at a community garden, talking with a person who is homeless on the side of the street, and to amplify the voices of others. Each of these suggestions encourage people to build their empathy through doing, similar to what I hope to do in my own program.

Empathy Building Programs

Not only can one do a simple Google search on empathy and find many articles that give quick tips and tricks for building empathy, but there are also existing empathy building programs. In my own search for these programs, they were common but not as common as one might think, yet nonetheless exist. In comparison to the articles I found when doing my research, these programs are more developed and ask one to commit to completing practices, activities, reflection, etc. But, in comparison to the articles that can be found when doing a Google search, these empathy building programs are not as convenient nor accessible due to having to purchase them most of the time. When searching for these programs, I found some that were geared toward schools (all levels), children, professionals and to a general audience. They ranged from being in a worksheet format to online modules that must be completed step by step.

One of the first programs I found was on the University of San Diego (USD) website under the Vice President of Student Affairs. If you look at the website, one can see that there are

two different empathy training options available, one being 15 minutes worth of content and the other being 30 minutes. When comparing these options side by side, the one that seems the most detailed and interactive is the 30 minute option, titled, “Staff Training Curriculum: Developing Empathy and Compassion.” The training follows a worksheet styled layout and requires at least two people who participate in the exercises together. Beyond these technical components, this training educates and involves participants in the work, requiring them to evaluate their own individual needs and as well as what they think their partner’s needs are. After identifying needs, there are a series of debrief questions such as, “When reviewing the needs of your challenging community member/guest was it easy to think about their needs? How might you understand the ‘challenging’ community member/guest’s needs differently? How might this activity focusing on empathy play a role in your future interactions?” (USD Student Affairs, n.d.). After going through these debriefing questions, the training program concludes with some follow up actions in which participants have to consider a “challenging member/guest and use the empathy scaffold to map out the perspective of their values and perception...” (n.d.).

The focus on human needs throughout the training offers an opportunity for participants to empathize with one another by breaking it down into basic human needs and connectivity. Because of this, it makes it easier to see that, at the end of the day, there are needs that we all require, like food and sleep. Through this process, participants are dignifying one another and seeing each other as human beings despite any differences. Another way that this training builds empathy is by getting to the foundation of our troubles and pains. For example, if I am in a fight with my partner because they are not giving me attention, the problem might not be that they do not want to talk to me but instead they are stressed and have a lot going on. If I was to empathize with my partner as I am asked through this training, I would evaluate my partner’s needs and

might be able to get to the foundation of why they are not giving me attention, coming to the conclusion that they need love and support to calm their stress. In the creation of my own program, I think that the debrief questions and exercises would be a great addition but would not be the sole focus of the program like it is for this training. While the training is important, there is so much more to building empathy, especially when building empathy for those of many different backgrounds.

During my search for empathy programs, the next one that caught my attention was made by *Ashoka's* Start Empathy Initiative, an initiative that is focused on “mobilizing Ashoka’s network of social entrepreneurs, educators, and concerned citizens who are working with young people to make empathy a priority skill for all children” (Ashoka, n.d.). On their website are various resources connected to empathy including a reading list and a list of ways to measure empathy in youth. What caught my attention the most on the *Ashoka* page is the “Start Empathy Toolkit,” which contains 85 pages of educational resources, practices and activities for building empathy in schools. Similarly to the USD Student Affairs empathy training, the toolkit is a digitized paper format, but takes it a step further by providing far more details, explanations and a variety of activities.

The Start Empathy Toolkit is broken down into three different steps: prepare, engage and reflect and act. The first step, prepare, sets the stage for the empathy building that is to come and demonstrates to students how “empathy is not developed in a vacuum. The environment—including the people in it and the values, rules and rituals that define it—matters. Before we can develop empathy in any meaningful sense, we must first create the conditions in which empathy can thrive” (Ashoka, p. 8, n.d.). And, to properly prepare, this first step consists of creating a safe space, developing emotional competency and leading by example. Each of these components has

its own section within the toolkit along with different activities and instructions. For the “Prepare” step, the activities that I like the most are the check-in and the “Stop. Breathe. Listen. Respond.” The check-in “is a daily ritual designed to create an emotionally safe learning environment and to offer space to hear and be heard” (Ashoka, p. 20). Giving the space to check-in each day not only normalizes it, but builds community between the participants making folks more comfortable to participate and engage in the material. Similarly, the “Stop. Breathe. Listen. Respond,” or SBLR, is an activity that teaches empathetic listening, a time when “...we aren’t distracted by other things and we really slow down to listen...” (Ashoka, p. 22). Since the *Ashoka* toolkit is geared towards the K-12 ages, SBLR has kids get into groups and share experiences of when someone has upset them. Those who are not speaking must enact the SBLR technique. Everyone in the group has a chance to share and listen, then when everyone is done, there are a set of reflection questions that encourages the kids to think how empathy connects to being a good leader, having a comfortable environment/space, etc (Ashoka, p. 24). Both of these aspects of the toolkit are important to set up and “prepare” everyone for success in this learning. Alongside the daily check-in, the SBLR cultivates a skill that will allow the children to become stronger and stronger in their empathy. In my program, I hope to incorporate both of these at the beginning as is done in this toolkit. Both are important to laying a strong foundation and properly set-up participants when engaging with more intensive materials.

Engage, the next component of the Start Empathy Toolkit, consists of storytelling, group play, immersion, and collective problem-solving. Each of these “engage” participants in various empathy-building activities that show the many ways one can understand another’s feelings and become more empathetic towards them. Throughout this part of the toolkit, participants are asked to listen and share stories, problem solve together in an adaptive way, immerse themselves

in other's experiences and have fun at the same time. While each step's activities do a good job of immersing the children in the process of becoming more empathetic, an activity that stood out to me is "This Student's Life," which "allows students to explore their shared identity and differences through storytelling... *This Student's Life* builds community and helps students realize they're not alone" (Ashoka, p. 45). During the activity, students are asked to discuss with one another what it is like to live with a certain personal characteristic that they have. These characteristics can be anything from a physical characteristic to speaking a different language. When speaking about their characteristics, the students are supposed to address what they like about this characteristic, what they do not like about this characteristic and what they would like other people to know. By sharing all of this with the group, they see one another on a new level and develop deeper understandings and relationships. Students are given the opportunity to empathize with each other and see connections between their own characteristics and those of the group.

The last piece of the toolkit is "Reflect and Act," which incorporates identifying shared values and differences, enabling action, and instilling courage. Within this step, the Ashoka team emphasizes the significance of putting our empathy into action by recognizing the shared humanity in others while also appreciating differences, intentionally counteracting forces that stand in the way against prosocial behaviors, and exercising behaviors that are intended to benefit others (Ashoka, p. 61). And to do so, during this final stretch of the toolkit, students partake in reflection of what they have learned throughout the program, a lesson on being a bystander and intervention, and a design-thinking activity that gets students thinking about how they would address a problem with empathy in mind. One activity even lays out five different scenarios that students might face at school, asking them to evaluate how they might act if they

decide to take a bystander role or if they decide to stand up and do something about the situation. For example, the first scenario is based on a situation in which a student is seen sitting alone at lunch and is getting made fun of for having a “gross” lunch by other students (Ashoka, p. 70). At the end of the scenario description, the student is asked what they can do to help the student who is eating alone and being bullied because of his lunch. For people of all ages, especially for younger students, interacting with scenarios like these show what empathy in action looks like and empower students to not be bystanders. These last activities, like the scenario based activity, are a culmination of leading by example, empathetic listening and evaluating the situation, and being a problem solver, which are all important skills of an empathetic person as shown throughout the toolkit. And, although designed for those in the K-12 age group, the Start Empathy Toolkit does a fabulous job of engaging students in the process toward building empathy and has thoughtfully gathered a range of practices and activities that are intentional and multifaceted. Simultaneously, the program is something that all children can take part in and get something out of.

Now that I have highlighted two empathy building programs that follow a similar design in terms of being cost-free and in a multipage PDF format, I want to spotlight two other programs that have to be purchased and follow a more engaging, modular approach. While I was unfortunately unable to pay for these programs and therefore could not see the content details, it is important for me to mention them in this paper because I admire their layout and hope to mirror it in my own program.

The first program can be found on LinkedIn Learning, LinkedIn’s platform for online learning that consists of many online courses and certificate programs. The program is called, “Empathy at Work,” and it contains about 47 minutes of content with four chapters. At the end of

each chapter, there is a chapter quiz and those who complete the program get a certificate of completion. The intended audience for this program appears to be professionals who want to “learn about the different types of empathy, as well as the benefits of fully embracing the practice of empathy in the workplace” (LinkedIn, 2022). The four chapters of the program include defining empathy, overcoming challenges to empathy, developing empathy, and working with empathy. Within these chapters, the components of each that stood out to me were addressing the benefits of empathy, thinking about personal bias, how to communicate empathy and ways to practice empathy every day (LinkedIn). While I am unable to view the entire program, I was able to preview the introduction step for free and noticed that the program’s format consists of videos and engaging activities that must be completed in order to move to the next step. In contrast to the programs that I found on USD’s and Ashoka’s websites, because of LinkedIn’s modular design, participants are put on the spot and held accountable to engage in the activities and information.

Likewise, The Empathy University offers a paid “Certified Empathic Professional Programme” that is a “3-month course in which professionals from across the globe can learn the fundamental and practical aspects of everyday empathy practice within small, intimate groups” (The Empathy University, 2020). Like the LinkedIn Learning program, this one is also broken down into six lessons: introduction to empathy, self-empathy and emotional awareness, self-empathy in response to the outside world, overcoming empathy barriers affecting personal life, overcoming empathy barriers affecting professional life, and adversarial empathy and conflict management. Along with these lessons, the website claims that as a product of going through the program, participants will improve their listening skills, learn how to use empathy in their personal and professional lives, and more. Despite the fact that I had limited access to

reviewing the contents of this program, I was able to grasp what I liked and disliked about it. Just as I did with the LinkedIn program, I like The Empathy University's program design and how it is spread out over time. Yet, I do not like how the program seems to have an emphasis on improving oneself for the benefit of oneself rather than for the benefit of others. In my program, while I want people to grow and improve their skills, I will make sure to emphasize the importance of building our empathy to create a better society and combat the struggles of marginalized communities.

Each of these empathy building programs had their own strengths and weaknesses. The USD training and Ashoka's Start Empathy Toolkit were both accessible and cost-free, but lacked the engaging aspect of LinkedIn Learning and The Empathy University's certificate programs. But, something that especially surprised me was the lack of dialogue on the need for empathy in connection to advocacy and social justice. As I went through each program, I saw an emphasis placed on needing to understand others, conflict management and creating better work environments, but I was disappointed that there was little acknowledgement of the impact and importance of empathy in making systemic change. Nonetheless, I do recognize that each program was created for a different purpose and audience, and I hope to borrow features from each program when designing my own.

Limitations

Now that I have shared my personal experience with this work, illustrated the importance of empathy, and examined the existing literature, I want to address the limitations of my thesis. First, the largest limitation to this thesis is the fact that I had no funding for the project and therefore could not pay to research and look further into paid programs and resources. When

reviewing existing empathy building programs, this limitation was most hindering because I could not fully evaluate the content of paid courses. In the future, I hope that I can find funding opportunities so that I can expand my research, especially on current paid programs.

Another limitation that I want to highlight is how this paper does not discuss concepts that are similar to empathy but not explicitly labeled as “empathy.” This includes emotional intelligence and compassion, two concepts that include the values of empathy and are deeply connected and tied to what I intended to investigate in this project. The lack of discussion around both items is a limitation of this paper because they would add depth and wider perspective on empathy and its importance. Because of this, I also did not research existing programs, suggested activities and practices that encourage compassion and emotional intelligence within the individual. This research would also be helpful and would make for a more dynamic paper, but these concepts and research are beyond the scope of this project.

Lastly, due to time constraints, a limitation to my thesis is not diving deeper into the intersectional perspectives and understandings of empathy. One perspective in particular that would have added more depth to the research and overall project would have been an evaluation on how gender and empathy intersect. Although I allude to this intersection in my “Importance of Empathy” section, a deeper look into who is more inclined to feel empathy and to empathize with others based on an identity perspective would have allowed me to tailor my research to these specific audiences and search for activities and practices that would be most beneficial to these people. Further, I think a general look into intersectionality and empathy would allow for a richer comprehension of who needs to engage in empathy building work the most and how experiences and identities impact our capacity for empathy. When I go to develop my own empathy building program, I will explore these ideas more deeply.

Suggestions & Going Forward

This thesis gives a detailed overview of the importance of empathy, its impacts, and evaluates existing empathy building programs. Yet, this paper is just barely touching the tip of the iceberg and has the potential to be further explored and developed. Going forward, I plan to continue this research and eventually create a full functioning, free empathy program that can be implemented in spaces that are accessible to all members of the USD community, regardless of class, status, education, etc. When I return to my study about empathy, I will make sure to address the limitations that I have mentioned and deepen my knowledge even more. In order to bridge the gaps of information that I mentioned previously, I hope to consider the many perspectives on empathy that exist, making the research multidisciplinary.

For now, I would like to propose the components of an empathy program that I hope to someday be part of implementing. My empathy building program would look very similar to a class that is a semester long. Depending on the setting, this program could look something like the LinkedIn Learning program or even follow the in-person class style. Participants would meet together twice or three times a week and there would be class lectures, in-class activities, outside of class activities, and homework. The first few weeks of the class would be focused on understanding empathy and laying a shared foundation for the activities and practices that would follow. During this initial component, students would collaborate to come up with a shared definition of empathy, understand why it is important and consider their own intersectionality.

The next component of the program would consist of a range of activities and practices that participants would engage in to build their empathy. These include: attending listening sessions, watching movies and TV shows, reading stories, having conversations with people of different experiences than their own, being part of community building circles, engaging in

role-playing, script-reading, and attending events like USD's MyStory, where other students are sharing personal stories and moments of difficulty. Participants would be required to do at least one activity each week and then either come back to class and reflect on their learning experience with the group or write a reflection paper on the experience. At this point of the program, I will also make sure to share that it is essential for everyone to step out of their comfort zone and interact with different experiences than their own. I will also acknowledge that in some of the activities outlined, participants might express familiarity with various communities. If this occurs, we could consider an alternative project for them or they might participate in a different way due to already having a sense of empathy for that particular community. By doing this, we are acknowledging that we all require work in different places that are not always the same for everyone.

The last part of the program will be a culminating activity in which students will review where they were in their empathy journey when they first started and where they are now. Along with this activity, students will be asked to demonstrate this empathy by committing themselves to an act of service or some other action item that demonstrates how they have begun to put their learning and newfound empathy into action.

Conclusion

Empathy, commonly referred to as "stepping into someone else's shoes," is more than just perspective taking. In fact, I would re-define empathy as, "taking on someone else's perspective in hopes of making their troubles and experiences better because of a hyper awareness of their emotions, experiences, struggles, pains, etc." This definition of empathy puts empathy in action and reflects the importance of empathy in larger systemic change and for

creating a better society. In this paper, I have investigated and answered my research questions: Why is empathy important? What are the potential impacts of empathy on people and communities? Can empathy be learned and if so, what are the processes, practices or curriculum that can be developed for this purpose?

Through a review of the existing literature, I have illustrated that empathy is important to understanding the perspectives of others and because of this, is an important skill to develop leaders within the healthcare, educational and professional fields. With empathy, we can understand, communicate and problem solve better because we are immersing ourselves in the other person's thoughts and feelings. Because of these components of empathy, there are only positive potential impacts that can occur if one is empathetic. As Hicks describes in their book, with empathy, we can eliminate cruelty and promote healthy and safe spaces for one another. Especially for those in positions of power, empathy has a large potential to encourage them to advocate for change within a system that disadvantages those outside the box of White, male and wealthy. With empathy, powerful people will feel more of a personal responsibility to advocate and be allies for the marginalized because the experiences of these people will be in closer proximity. Lastly, in regard to my last research question, empathy can be learned through many different ways such as participating in a program like on LinkedIn Learning or through the Empathy University. Empathy can also be learned through doing our own Google searches and finding tips and tricks for everyday practice. Overall, empathy can be provoked through being active listeners, learning to be quiet when needed, and encouraging ourselves to be immersed in spaces that are out of our comfort zone.

I want to conclude by emphasizing not only the importance of empathy but for all of us, especially White and white-passing folks, to partake in empathy building work. I call out these

groups of people because we have the most power in society and the most potential for making change. As said by Arundhati Ray, “Empathy may be the single most important quality that must be nurtured to give peace a fighting chance” (Quotes, n.d.). Let us all make it our personal responsibility to cultivate empathy within ourselves and within our system so that we can create a more equitable place that benefits everyone.

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I will now leave you with some words from Barack Obama:

“Learning to stand in someone else’s shoes, to see through their eyes, that’s how peace begins.

And it’s up to you to make that happen. Empathy is a quality of character that can change the world” (2009).

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