

Exploring the client's empathy toward others in the therapeutic setting

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In the work of psychological attention to parents who seek psychotherapy for their children, I use what I am calling provisionally, “exercise of empathy”. Usually, when parents tell me about their complaints and difficulties with their children, I reflect with them on the possible feelings of the child in relation to these complaints. I usually also ask them how they think their child sees them. These are moments in which empathy is at issue, requiring that, in this reflection with me, parents put themselves in the place of their children.

This is a questioning that entails several reflections. Often, parents are surprised; they realize they had never thought about these aspects and, sometimes, cannot put themselves in the place of their children. This “exercise of empathy” causes reflections, and the talk during the session almost always leads parents to surprising perceptions that become pleasant and make them available to relate more closely with their children, now that they can better understand them. When parents put themselves in the place of their children, they leave a possible confronting position for a possible partnership. Their suffering diminishes, and they feel empowered. As my proposal for psychological attention to parents has been inspiring several Brazilian psychologists who adopt the Person-Centered Approach and has been spreading, my goal is to discuss its possibilities when seeing individual clients. This is an approach to the client's empathy toward others who are not present in the individual session and who are not the motivation for the session, as opposed to what happens in sessions for parents. Despite being called an “exercise”, this practice does not intend to be introduced and used as a technique. However, putting this consideration aside, we might discuss whether it would be a technique when applied to the individual session.

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