



MOVING WITH COMMUNITY

Empathic Planning Toolkit



Empathy in Planning

Why it matters?

What is empathy?

Empathy is a concept that has long been studied and discussed, but it remains ambiguous and ill-defined. As a concept, it is commonplace in everyday speech, although its meaning is often only understood by most on a superficial level. Simply, it is the ability to understand and experience the emotions of another, but there are layers of complexity.

Researchers have generally accepted three components of empathy. The two main components are cognitive and affective empathy. Affective empathy is the “capacity to feel the emotions of others” (Goldman, 2019, p.3). Cognitive empathy is “having a sense of how another person is feeling” (Goldman, 2019, p.4). The third component of empathy discussed by researchers has several different names, referred to either as affective concern, compassionate empathy or empathetic concern. This component not only allows people to understand but motivates people to act and help.

Why does empathy matter in planning?

In the Canadian Institute of Planning’s (CIP) Code of Conduct, there is no mention of empathy. However, when speaking to planners, all acknowledged empathy was a part of their role. Empathy is a critical aspect of effective communication, so the minimal attention to the concept in a communicative and engagement-focused profession is surprising.

CIP’s professional enabling competencies include social interaction and skills such as mediation, facilitation, negotiation, and conflict resolution. These are communication-based skills that support the planner’s responsibility to the public interest. Empathy is not included within these competencies, but it is critical to their implementation. Successful communication relies on the knowledge of people and their perspectives. As a communicative profession, empathy is critical. Planning can benefit from the knowledge empathy fosters both for the individual planners and planning processes.



Being an Empathic Planner

Tools of Enhancing Empathy

Determine empathy's role in your position

Within the planning profession, there are many different roles and positions. Planners work in diverse areas such as transportation, housing, environmental planning and Indigenous planning, covering a wide spectrum of specializations at all three levels of government. The high degree of variation within the field means empathy is employed differently in each role. Therefore, it is important for workplaces and individuals to recognize where and when empathy is most important. Planners should also identify where empathy can be enhanced and the possible risks for empathic distress.

Tools and skills to enhance empathy

Self-reflection

Self-reflection plays a critical role in enhancing and mastering empathy within planning practice. Through self-reflection, planners can understand themselves and their positionality, helping to inform their interactions and understanding of others. Self-reflection is an individual experience and difficult to prescribe, however, Lyles and Swearingen White's (2019) research created prompting questions when discussing care in planning. The questions they created can equally be applied to consider and enhance empathy. Lyles and Swearingen White's questions will be featured throughout the tools to prompt planners to think critically about their current actions and opportunities for improvement.

Questions to consider

1. Am I attuned to my own thoughts, feelings, and behaviours, including those I would prefer to not experience?
 2. Am I attuned to how my thoughts, feelings, and behaviours change (or do not change) over time and context?
 3. Am I attuned to interactions between my feelings, thoughts, needs, and behaviours?
 4. Am I aware of my own strengths and worth, personally and professionally?
 5. Am I aware of my own limits and vulnerabilities, personally and professionally?
 6. Am I aware of my own identity(ies) and how it shapes my privileges, relationships, and work?
- (Lyles and Swearingen White, 2019)

Perspective-taking

Perspective-taking is an essential cognitive component of empathy and a crucial tool for planners to effectively employ empathy. When planners can employ perspective-taking, they are able to suspend judgement and reflect on the experiences and feelings of another. To understand the public and the public interest, perspective-taking is an important tool to inform both short interactions and long-term policy decisions.

Questions to consider

1. Do I take responsibility for my own ignorance and respectfully work to learn about others?
 2. Am I committed to learning about others as unique individuals?
 3. Am I aware of the broader social, cultural, and professional networks in which people I work with are embedded?
 4. Do I accurately and consistently perceive the feelings of others?
 5. Do I strive to listen to the deeper meaning and emotions that words often convey?
 6. Am I sensitive to individual and group-level traumas that can surface?
 7. Do I ask questions from a place of humility and genuine curiosity?
 8. Do I keep in mind that others' thoughts, emotions, and behaviours are rarely fixed over time?
 9. Do I acknowledge the wide differences in individual and group experiences brought to any situation?
 10. Am I willing to acknowledge and focus attention on injustices and systems of oppression?
 11. Am I able to tolerate uncomfortable thoughts, feelings, and behaviours and hold space as others have similar experiences?
- (Lyles and Swearingen White, 2019)

Active listening

Active listening is a key tool to improve empathic understand, discussed both in the empathy literature and in conversations with planners. In planning, active listening allows a planner to listen to the needs and feelings of another without interjections or assumptions. By using active listening, planners can more effectively empathize and assess needs. Active listening also creates an environment where people can be heard rather than interpreted.

Important elements of active listening

1. Suspend judgement
2. Paraphrase and repeat to ensure understand
3. Ask open-ended questions
4. Use non-verbal gestures and engaged body language
5. Leave silences open
6. Provide feedback but avoid giving advice
7. Take turns
8. Pay attention and stay focused on listening

Act with compassion

Compassion translates empathy into action and leads to helping behaviour. In *The Prospect of Compassionate Planning*, Lyles, White and Lavelle (2018) drew attention to compassion in planning and its benefits. Compassion can lead to better health and well-being in our personal and professional lives, countering feelings of empathic distress and turning empathy into positive and empowering experiences. Cultivating compassion begins with other skills such as self-reflection, perspective-taking and mindfulness, and creates behaviours that help reduce suffering. Compassion takes empathic concern and translates it into positive action.

Questions to consider

1. Am I aware that power can be a vital force that generates a sense of purpose, for oneself and others?
2. Do I try to practice what I ask of others, demonstrating reciprocal commitment and responsibility?
3. Do I use my awareness of others to help them be in a position to prosper and succeed?
4. Do I strive to be a catalyst and champion for change, taking risks to share or reallocate power?
5. Am I willing to feel and express vulnerability to foster relationships and empower others?
6. Do I recognize that experiencing suffering and wishing for happiness are natural for all people?
7. Do I extend care to others in ways that meet their needs?
8. Do I extend care to myself in ways that meet my needs?
9. Do I receive care from others in ways that meet my needs?

(Lyles and Swearingen White, 2019)

Mindfulness

Mindfulness encourages a heightened awareness of one's emotions. Practicing mindfulness takes many different forms ranging from breathing exercises to guided imagery. Research has shown mindfulness improves emotional regulation and empathy, while also helping to prevent empathic fatigue and burnout. According to Ferreira (2013), practicing mindfulness would also help understand planners the influence of emotions in their decisions with maturity and ethical integrity. Planners would, therefore, be more attuned to emotional elements of their role and providing a tool to handle them.

Questions to consider

1. Am I able to manage my difficult thoughts, feelings, impulses, and behaviours?
2. Am I able to adapt and be flexible, learning from past experiences, good and bad?
3. Am I invested in my own growth while being realistic and patient about my innate biases and tendencies?
4. Am I able to build self-confidence in tracking my thoughts and feelings to hone my ability to work with others?
5. When I face a challenge or setback, do I look for opportunities for growth?
6. Can I recognize when I am stressed (or feel threatened) and take steps to reduce my stress so I do not perpetuate or spread my stress?
7. Do I have reliable practices or tools to manage my emotions, like deep breathing, exercise, mindfulness meditation, or creative expression?

(Lyles and Swearingen White, 2019)

Empathy mapping

Empathy mapping is an essential tool for both individuals and teams working with design thinking but it can also be a helpful tool for planners. During the empathize phase of design thinking, an empathy map allows the designer(s) to reflect on what the user has said but also their thoughts, actions and feelings. Using the map is a way to debrief after interactions and engagements to forge a greater understanding of others. For planners, empathy maps could be used both individually and in teams to visualize the emotions that are often missed in planning processes. After engaging, planners can fill out the four quadrants of the empathy map and reflect.





Forging Empathy

Adding Empathy to Planning Processes

Determine empathy's role in the planning process

The conflictual nature of planning is well-documented in the literature. This issue persists today, and empathy may play a role in creating more positive and inclusive processes. When participants were asked about encouraging empathy within planning processes, many agreed it was a part of the planner's role and an important aspect of the engagement. From the participants' perspectives, empathy could be added to planning processes in a myriad of ways.

Tools to add empathy

Engagement for everyone

To make processes more empathic they must be inclusive and consider those often who are often unheard and unengaged. When asking planners about how to make more empathic processes, many discussed more inclusive, equitable and meaningful engagement. According to planners, this not only encourages planners to understand different perspectives but also fosters empathy within the public.

Example: The quest for empathy in Shullcas Valley, Peru

Haller's (2017) research explored two distinct populations and the need to forge empathy through collaborative planning. In Peru, the expanding urban areas of the Shullcas Valley have created a peri-urban environment mixed with powerful urbanites and less influential small landholders. Haller tested the new urbanites' empathy for the small landowners and the possibility of building understanding through a collaborative planning process. The original land development plans for the region acknowledged the ecological and agricultural areas but failed to engage the small landowners and their interests. Unknowledge in the plans, this left small landholders afraid of losing their land and their way of life.

From interviews, Haller suggested the urbanites empathized with the small landholders. However, they often misunderstood or were unaware of important issues the small landholders faced. Haller expressed engaging the two groups together in a collaborative discussion would encourage awareness about complex problems. By bring the small landholders to the table, it would create a more inclusive and empathic process.

Engagement where everyone is heard

Engagement is often dominated by the loudest in the room and in the process. Planners reflected this sentiment, suggesting the loudest voices often overpower planning processes. Therefore, to hear and gain empathy in engagement, planners should create environments where everyone has the opportunity to speak and be heard. There are many facilitation techniques to create equitable engagement environments and understanding the context is the first step in deciding what will work best.

Choosing an engagement technique

1. Carefully consider the context and where empathy can be added.
2. Do additional research and engage before engagement.
3. Create a stakeholder map and identify the loudest and most vulnerable voices.
4. Understand when groups should be engaged together and when they should be engaged separately.
5. Identify possible emotions in play.
6. Look at the power dynamics and creating an equitable engagement.
7. Use small groups and one-on-one engagement when possible.
8. Create rotational conversation, where everyone has an opportunity to converse i.e. world cafe and open space technology.
9. Identify where there needs to be facilitation and supports.
10. Present unheard perspectives and create awareness i.e. storytelling and empathy walks.

Empathic design

Empathic design has long been embraced by the design community. Using a four steps process, discovery, immersion, connection and detachment, the designer works to deeply understand the needs of the user and then design from their perspective.

Design thinking is another form of empathic design that focuses on experimentation. The process emphasizes collaboration, encouraging the client and the designer to work closely together on each step of the process. The five most discussed stages of design thinking are empathizing, defining, ideating, prototyping and testing. Both empathetic design and design thinking provide a myriad of tools and techniques that can be applied to planning.

Design thinking

Empathize

Define

Ideate

Prototype

Test

Education

Empathy requires knowledge and understanding. Therefore, education is an integral tool in forging empathy in planning processes. Cognitive empathy skills rely on having familiarity and contextual understanding, making it more difficult to empathize across cultures and classes. To help remove prejudice and misunderstanding, education and awareness are essential to building understanding. Planners agreed about the importance of education in planning, describing how to make accurate information accessible and education-based engagement to encourage empathy.

Example: Red Deer creating a public awareness plan

1. Establish overall purpose, objectives, and outcomes
 2. Collect initial information
 3. Identify the audience
 4. Decide on your key message
 5. Select the actions/activities
 6. Select the communication tools
 7. Develop a plan
 8. Evaluate and celebrate
- (The City of Red Deer, n.d.)

Role-playing

Both empathy and planning literature discussed role-play as an effective means to create emotional understanding. Roleplay provides context by pushing people to think outside their own narrative. It is an “empathy-enhancement intervention” focusing on imitation, using people’s biological mirror neurons to formulate a shared experience (Gerdes, Lietz, & Segal, 2011a). Although, Sandercock (2003) warned about the mimicry and the stereotyping of other people’s views. Role-playing can be a useful tool to forge empathy but needs to be done within an informed context.

Example: Using digital role-playing game to build empathy

Gordon and Shirra (2011) studied the implementation of digital role-playing games in community engagement. Using a role-playing game called Participatory Chinatown, Gordon and Shirra looked at engaging community members in the transitional issues of Boston’s Chinatown. As a gentrified neighbourhood, Chinatown struggled to maintain its Chinese identity and remain affordable for new immigrants. The master planning process wanted to address these issues not only by using traditional engagement techniques but by creating something more interactive.

Participatory Chinatown was a multi-user game where all players shared the same physical space. Participants were provided with laptops, as well as the game was projected at the front to show an overall perspective of the game. There were 15 characters that represented stakeholders in the neighbourhood, from new immigrants to elders. While playing, participants were tasked with finding a place to work, live and socialize using decision cards and their character’s perspective. Overall, this type of engagement proved effective to enhance empathy around local issues. Participatory Chinatown engaged a wide community demographic, encouraging collaboration and perspective-taking.

Storytelling

Stories and storytelling play a critical role in planning practice by communicating perspectives and creating contextual understanding. Planners suggested storytelling can be a powerful engagement technique. Zitcher and Lake described how “narrative or storytelling is a communicative method that makes disparate or incommensurable perspectives accessible to differently situated participants” (Porter et al., 2012, p. 609). Storytelling has been countlessly recognized by scholars as a critical tool to aid the emotional turn in planning, and in the same way inform empathy.

Storytelling Techniques

1. Oral Storytelling - Present or discuss stories.
2. Video and Film - Create and/or show films to present complex narratives.
3. Photovoice - Use photos for a visual representation of stories, either with or without narration.
4. Graphic Storytelling - Invite participate to draw and be creative to present their perspectives.
5. Written Storytelling - Have participants write their own stories and read the stories of others from a simple sentence to an article.
6. Digital Storytelling - Use everyday technology and social media to share stories and engage with the community.
7. Interactive Storytelling - Create stories together in collaboration and perhaps plan future narratives for the community

References



Codes of Professional Conduct. (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://cip-icu.ca/Careers-in-Planning/Codes-of-Professional-Conduct>

Ferreira, A. (2013). Emotions in planning practice: a critical review and a suggestion for future developments based on mindfulness. *Town Planning Review*, 84(6), 703-719. <https://doi.org/10.3828/tpr.2013.37>

Gerdes, Lietz & Segal. (2011a). Measuring Empathy in the 21st Century: Development of an Empathy Index Rooted in Social Cognitive Neuroscience and Social Justice. *Social Work Research*, 35(2), 83-93. <https://doi.org/10.1093/swr/35.2.83>.

Goldman, B. (2019). *The power of kindness: why empathy is essential in everyday life*. Toronto, Ontario, Canada: HaperCollins Publishers Ltd.

Great Good Science Centre. (n.d.). Active Listening [PDF file]. Retrieved from <https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/images/uploads/ActiveListening.pdf>

Haller, A. (2017). Urbanites, smallholders, and the quest for empathy: Prospects for collaborative planning in the periurban Shullcas valley, Peru. *Landscape and Urban Planning*, 165, 220-230. doi:10.1016/j.landurbplan.2016.04.015

Lyles, White, & Lavelle. (2018). The Prospect of Compassionate Planning. *Journal of Planning Literature*, 33(3), 247-266. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0885412217735525>

Lyles, & Swearingen White. (2019). Who cares?: Arnstein's ladder, the emotional paradox of public engagement, and (re)imagining planning as caring. *Journal of the American Planning Association*, 85(3), 287-300. doi:10.1080/01944363.2019.1612268

National Health Service. (n.d.). Quality, Service Improvement and Redesign Tools: Active listening [PDF file]. Retrieved from <https://improvement.nhs.uk/documents/2085/active-listening.pdf>

Porter, Sandercock, Umemoto, Bates & Zapata. (2012). What's Love Got To Do With It? Illuminations on Loving Attachment in Planning. *Planning Theory & Practice*, 13(4), 593-627. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14649357.2012.731210>

The City of Red Deer. (n.d.). Building Public Awareness: Toolkit [PDF file]. Retrieved from <https://www.reddeer.ca/media/reddeerca/recreation-and-culture/community-programs-and-information/Public-Awareness-Toolkit.pdf>

The University of Adelaide. (2014). Active Listening Writing Centre Learning Guide [PDF file]. Retrieved from <https://www.adelaide.edu.au/writingcentre/sites/default/files/docs/learningguide-activelisting.pdf>

Sandercock. (2003). Out of the Closet: The Importance of Stories and Storytelling in Planning Practice. *Planning Theory & Practice*, 4(1), 11-28. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1464935032000057209>