

# The Co-construction of Empathic Identity in Psychotherapy

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**Abstract:** The present study examines the co-construction process of psycho-therapists' empathic identity, drawing upon Arundale's Conjoint Co-constituting Model of Communication. Empathy, recognized as a core competence in psychotherapy, is essential not only for the success of therapeutic interventions but also for the establishment of trust and emotional resonance between the psychotherapist and the client. Previous research has predominantly conceptualized empathy as a personal trait or skill inherent to the psychotherapist, thereby neglecting its dynamic construction through interaction with the client. In this study, the counseling session transcripts of Carl Rogers are analyzed to explore how psychotherapists co-construct their empathic identity with clients through strategies such as affirmative responses, restating client utterances, first-person expressions, and continuous revision of discourse. The findings suggest that empathic identity is not a unilaterally constructed outcome by the psychotherapist but rather a gradually formed product through interaction and negotiation between both parties in the conversation. This process not only deepens emotional resonance between the two parties but also strengthens the trust within the therapeutic relationship. This study provides a novel theoretical perspective for understanding the dynamic construction of empathic identity and offers guidance for the application of empathic strategies in psychotherapy practice. Future research may further investigate the mechanisms of empathic identity construction in diverse psychotherapy contexts and explore how to tailor empathic strategies according to individual differences among clients.

**Keywords:** Conjoint Co-constituting Model of Communication, Empathic Identity, Identity Construction, Psychotherapy.

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## 1. Introduction

Within the domain of doctor-patient communication, the effective construction of a doctor's pragmatic identity is widely recognized as a crucial determinant in establishing positive doctor-patient relationships and has attracted substantial academic interest[1]. Psycho-therapy, as a form of "healing through words," relies on linguistic interaction to facilitate psychological recovery. In this context, empathy is not only a fundamental element of psychotherapy and treatment but also a core competency that psychotherapists must possess[2]. Therefore, the construction of an empathic identity by psychotherapists is of paramount importance. By effectively constructing an empathic identity, psychotherapists can better understand clients' emotions and needs, foster emotional resonance and trust, and ultimately enhance the efficacy of psychotherapy.

In recent years, with the advancement of identity construction theory, particularly Arundale's Conjoint Co-constituting Model of Communication[3], new theoretical perspectives have emerged for understanding the dynamic construction of identity[4]. This model posits that identity is not static but rather co-constructed through social interaction and discursive practices. Consequently, the construction of an empathic identity is not solely an individual act by the psychotherapist but a collaborative achievement between the psychotherapist and the client during their interaction.

Given this theoretical foundation, the present study aims to explore, within the framework of Arundale's Conjoint Co-constituting Model of Communication, how psychotherapists co-construct their empathic identities with clients through empathic conversational strategies. This study further seeks to provide a detailed analysis and theoretical interpretation of the phenomenon of joint identity construction during verbal communication, with the goal of uncovering the underlying

mechanisms of identity co-construction. This research endeavors to enrich the theoretical dimensions of identity construction and offer new theoretical support for enhancing the effectiveness of psychotherapeutic practice.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. A Review of Empathy

The study of empathy can be traced back to the field of philosophy. Immanuel Kant[5] introduced the concept of "common sense", positing that empathy is a universal emotional capacity that facilitates the understanding of others' emotions and experiences, thereby laying the foundation for subsequent research. In the realm of psychology, Sigmund Freud[6] regarded empathy as a core concept in psychoanalysis, proposing that it involves multiple psychological processes, including perception, attention, emotion, and cognition, which significantly expanded the scope of empathy research. John Dewey[7] emphasized the importance of empathy in education, arguing that teachers' empathic abilities can promote students' learning and development, further enriching the application contexts of empathy. In the latter half of the 20th century, empathy saw significant development in the field of psychotherapy. Edward Titchener[8] introduced the concept of empathy into psychology, viewing it as a process of forming mental images through internal simulation. Carl Rogers'[9] humanistic therapy theory further propelled the application of empathy in psychotherapy, emphasizing its crucial role in establishing therapeutic relationships and facilitating clients' self-exploration. Recent neuroscience research has indicated that empathy is closely related to the brain's mirror-neuron system and emotional regulation networks, providing important clues for its neural mechanisms[10].

In different psychotherapy theories, empathy plays a

unique role. Humanistic therapy regards empathy as a core capacity for establishing therapeutic relationships and promoting clients' self-exploration[9]. Within the context of cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), empathy is manifested through the therapist's understanding of the client's cognitive processes, emotional experiences, and behavioral patterns. This empathic engagement facilitates the identification and modification of mal-adaptive cognitive and emotional schemas[11]. Psychoanalytic therapy utilizes empathy to delve into the subconscious conflicts and dynamics of clients, thereby enhancing their self-awareness[12]. This foundational work has been expanded upon by subsequent researchers who have conducted comprehensive studies on empathy from diverse methodological angles. Liu Hang[13]analyzed the empathic techniques employed in psychotherapy, focusing on the precision of empathic engagement and the means to achieve it. WenYu[14], from a conversation analysis standpoint, posited that an empathic sequence is composed of three distinct phases and delineated indicators of empathic breakdown. LiuJia[15]examined the phenomenon of empathy fatigue among psychotherapists, along with coping strategies. Zhang Xinwei[16]

developed a model of empathy literacy for psychotherapists and designed a situational judgment test to distinguish therapists based on their experiential proficiency. Despite these contributions, existing research exhibits its limitations. Prior studies have predominantly conceptualized empathy as either a personal trait or a skill inherent to the therapist, overlooking the interactive and reciprocal nature of the therapeutic relationship. This unidirectional perspective inadequately captures the complex mechanisms through which empathy operates in psychotherapy and related contexts. Consequently, it hinders the advancement of strategies to enhance the efficacy and quality of empathic practice.

## 2.2. A review of Identity

Identity, as a central and highly debated topic in the humanities and social sciences [17], generated diverse research perspectives across disciplines such as social communication, psychology, socio-cultural linguistics, pragmatics, and conversation analysis[4]. Within the development of identity studies, two pre-dominant theoretical frameworks have emerged: essentialism and constructivism. The former posits that identity is an inherent, static, and fixed attribute, implying that it sees identity as completed before an individual enters into any particular interaction[18]. In contrast, the latter emphasizes that identity is dynamically, actively, and continuously constructed through discourse within social interactions[19]. As academic research has progressed, constructivism has emerged as the dominant perspective in identity studies[21], with characterized primarily by its dynamism and negotiability. Dynamism predominantly emphasizes that identity construction occurs as conversations unfold[21]. For instance, Zhang He [22] analyzed the "Taishigong said" section in the Records of the Grand Historian to explore the pragmatic identity constructed by Sima Qian. Xu Xin [23]analyzed the discourse in A Doll's House to examine the female identity constructed by the protagonist. Further studies have investigated professional identity construction through social media discourse, including teacher identity[24], athlete identity [25], and national identity[26]. These studies suggest that identity construction is a dynamic process, influenced by context, discursive

strategies, and the inter-locutors involved. Negotiability primarily refers to the concept that identity is constructed through negotiation between interlocutors[21]. ChenXinren[27]revealed that pragmatic identity in medical consultation discourse is dynamically negotiated through interlocutors' accommodation to contextual factors and psychological needs. Li Chengtuan[28]analyzed argumentative discourse to explore how interlocutors deconstruct others' identities to negotiate and construct their own professional identities. These studies further illustrate that identity construction is not a unidirectional process but rather a product of ongoing adjustment and negotiation between the interacting parties. Despite the extensive application of identity construction theory across various domains, its application within psychological counseling remains relatively constrained, and there is a dearth of systematic empirical research. Existing studies often provide superficial descriptions of psychotherapists' empathic identity construction processes, failing to offer detailed analyses of interactional dynamics.

## 3. Theoretical Framework and Research Methods

### 3.1. Theoretical Framework

#### 3.1.1. Identity Construction Theory

Identity constructionism emphasizes that identity is neither an innate nor a fixed attribute, but rather a dynamically constructed product that emerges through continuous interactions between individuals and their social environments within specific social practices[29]. Within this theoretical framework, discourse is posited as the fundamental mechanism through which identity is both constructed and negotiated. The formation, expression, and interpretation of identity are inherently dependent on discursive practices, which are mediated through language, symbols, and social interactions[20]. Identity construction is characterized by dynamism. It is not fixed or unchanging but is perpetually modified and reconfigured in response to shifts in context and interactional dynamics. In verbal communication, individuals strategically select and modulate their identity expressions in accordance with situational demands to fulfill diverse communicative needs[21]. Furthermore, identity construction is inherently negotiable. This process is neither unidirectional nor monologic; rather, it involves the attainment of mutual understanding through interactive and dialogic engagement with others. During communicative exchanges, individuals or groups engage in continuous negotiation and reconstruction of their identities through discursive expression, feedback, and adaptive responses[30].

Thus, identity construction is not merely a manifestation of individual self-awareness but also a product of intricate social relationships and culturally embedded meanings. It represents a complex interplay between personal agency and sociocultural influences, underscoring the reciprocal relationship between individual identity and broader social structures.

#### 3.1.2. Conjoint Co-constituting Model of Communication

The conjoint co-constituting model of communication, proposed by American scholar Arundale, conceptualizes interaction as an emergent phenomenon arising from discourse sequences, addressing the fundamental question of "how participants achieve meaning and action in everyday

conversation." Central to this model is the premise that conversational sequentiality is fundamentally shaped by the adjacency of utterances exchanged between two or more participants. It posits that conjoint co-constituting involves the interplay of interactional constraints, the interpretive processes of both participants, and the design processes of discourse, resulting in non-terminal outcomes. In other words, communication is not merely the co-construction of meaning and action but rather a collaborative endeavor of joint co-constitution[3]. This model is grounded in three core principles: The Adjacent Placement Principle (APP): This principle asserts that participants design and interpret each utterance concerning its preceding and subsequent utterances, thereby establishing a tightly interwoven relationship between meanings and actions. The adjacency of utterances serves as a critical mechanism for ensuring coherence and continuity in interaction. The Sequential Interpretation Principle (SIP): According to this principle, participants interpret messages not in isolation but within the broader context provided by preceding and following utterances. This underscores the importance of contextual continuity in communication, as meaning is derived from the sequential flow of discourse rather than from discrete utterances. The Recipient Design Principle (RDP): This principle highlights the adaptive nature of communication, wherein participants tailor their linguistic and behavioral choices based on their understanding of the recipient's needs, background, and expectations. Such recipient-oriented design facilitates more effective communication and enhances the collaborative construction of meaning[3].

### 3.2. Methodology

The data for this study are derived from the counseling session transcripts included in the book *The Psychotherapy of Carl Rogers-Cases and Commentary*. These transcripts provide a detailed and systematic record of the dialogues between the psychotherapist (Carl Rogers) and his clients, encompassing a wide range of psychological issues and emotional expressions. The selection of these transcripts is justified by Rogers' foundational role in humanistic psychotherapy and his distinctive counseling approach, which is deeply characterized by empathic engagement. As such, these transcripts offer a rich and nuanced corpus of empathic interactions, making them particularly suitable for the current investigation. To guarantee the precision and integrity of the analysis, the session recordings were transcribed into a textual format, maintaining the veracity and completeness of the dialogues and thus laying a solid foundation for the subsequent analytical procedures. The analytical focus of this study centers on examining the psychotherapist's modes of empathic expression and the corresponding response patterns of clients, as evidenced in the transcribed session texts. Through meticulous analysis, the study aims to elucidate how the psychotherapist employs empathic strategies to foster meaningful interaction with clients and, further, to explore how such interaction facilitates the collaborative construction of empathic identity. By drawing on the insights from *The Psychotherapy of Carl Rogers-Cases and Commentary*, this research aims to enhance the understanding of the dynamic and co-constructed nature of empathic identity within the context of psychotherapeutic practice.

## 4. Conversational Strategies and Co-construction of Empathic Identity

In psychotherapy, the empathic identity of the psychotherapist does not exist in isolation but is gradually formed through interaction and co-construction with the client. This interactive process relies not only on the professional skills of the psychotherapist but also on the specific behaviors and strategies employed by both parties in the conversation.

### 4.1. Affirmative Responses

Under the framework of Conjoint Co-constituting Model of Communication, the empathic identity of the psychotherapist is conceptualized not as a static personal attribute but as a dynamic process that evolves through interaction and co-construction with the client. Affirmative responses, as a crucial empathic strategy, serve a dual purpose: they are a mechanism for therapists to convey understanding and support, and they are also instrumental in the construction of the therapist's empathic identity[31].

[PCR-1986-19]

- 01 Rogers: From what you've said, it seems to me that you believe it's not advisable to change part of yourself to conform to society, and you still aspire to be a complete self.
- 02 Mary: Exactly. Because the self is innate.
- 03 Rogers: Mm - hm, mm - hm. That's inborn in you, and it's precisely what makes you unique. You're willing to be who you are.
- 04 Mary: Yes, that's right. I occasionally have this thought: I'm not ↑resigned to it, and I don't want to ↑ give up.

In this dialogue, Rogers employs affirmative responses (such as "That's inborn in you, and it's precisely what makes you unique.") to interpret Mary's insistence on her self-worth and designs subsequent responses to enhance Mary's emotional experience. Such interactions not only foster a sense of understanding and support for Mary but also contribute to the gradual construction of Rogers' empathic identity through this interactive engagement. When Mary reciprocates with affirmations like "Yes, that's right," it serves to validate Rogers' interpretation, thereby reinforcing his empathic stance and enhancing the significance of their interaction. Rogers' affirmative responses are contingent upon Mary's prior utterances ("The self is innate"). This interactive approach, which builds upon preceding discourse, facilitates a co-construction of meaning between both parties. Through this ongoing exchange, Rogers and Mary collaboratively interpret the dialogue's significance, thereby further consolidating Rogers' identity as an empathizer.

In summary, affirmative responses serve not only as a mechanism for psychotherapists to express empathy but also as a critical tool for constructing their empathic identity within the framework of conjoint co-construction. Through affirmative responses, psychotherapists can jointly interpret emotional experiences with clients, design appropriate interactive approaches, and enhance the emotional connection between both parties, ultimately fostering a more profound therapeutic alliance.

### 4.2. Restating Client's Utterances

By restating the client's utterances, the psychotherapist not only demonstrates their effort to understand the client's feelings and perspectives but also, through this interactive

process, progressively constructs their identity as an empathizer. The process of restating allows the psychotherapist to verify the accuracy of their interpretation of the client's expressions while simultaneously providing feedback that affirms the client's sense of being heard, valued, and accepted[32].

[PCR-1983-15]

- 01 Rogers: It sounds like you're self-judging, (.)deeming yourself guilty, and punishing yourself.  
 02 Jill: Yes, I'm the most detestable person.  
 03 Rogers: You've given yourself a >rather severe sentence<.  
 04 Jill: Yes, [I'm not lenient enough with myself.  
 05 Rogers: Yes, [you're not lenient enough with yourself.]  
 06 Jill: Mm-hm.

In this dialogue, Rogers employs the strategy of restating Jill's utterances (such as "You've given yourself a rather severe sentence" and "You're not lenient enough with yourself") to interpret Jill's self-denying emotions and to design subse-quent responses that amplify her emo-tional experience. The act of restatement not only fosters in Jill a sense of being understood and accepted but also contributes to the construction of Rogers' identity as an empathizer through this interactive process. Rogers' restatements are designed based on Jill's preceding utterances (such as "I'm the most detestable person" and "I'm not lenient enough with myself"). This interactional approach, grounded in the adjacency of discourse, allows both participants to co-construct meaning within the dialo-gue. Jill's affirmative responses (such as "Yes") not only validate Rogers' interpretations but also deepen the relational and emotional significance of their inter-action. Through this iterative process of interaction, Roger sand Jill collabo-ratively interpret the meaning of their exchange, thereby further solidifying Rogers' identity as an empathizer.

In summary, restating clients' utter-ances is not only a way for psycho-therapists to express empathy but also an important means of constructing their empathic identity in the process of conjoint co-construction. Through re-statement, psychotherapists can jointly interpret emotional experiences with clients, design appropriate interactive approaches, and enhance the emotional connection between both parties. This process of identity construction is a concrete manifestation of the conjoint co-construction model in psychotherapy.

### 4.3. First-person Expression

In the domain of psychotherapy, the employment of first-person pronouns represents an efficacious empathic technique[14]. This method enables psy-chotherapists to transcend the limitations imposed by their professional role and to position themselves within the client's cognitive and emotional framework. By articulating their understanding of the client's sentiments and experiences using first-person expressions such as "I" or "we," psychotherapists can convey a sense of authentic emotional attunement. This approach is pivotal as it allows clients to perceive the psychotherapist's genuine empathy, which in turn serves to bolster the trust and emotional bond between the therapist and the client. Consequently, the use of first-person expressions is instrumental in fostering a therapeutic relationship characterized by mutual understanding and connection.

[PCR-1982-08]

- 01 Mary: (.)But, yes, on the other hand, I'm really lonely.  
 02 Rogers: I think the crux of the problem is: "For someone

like↑ me who is so solitary and different, is there a place for me in this world?"=

- 03 Mary: = Yes, that's exactly it.

In this dialogue, Rogers employs first-person expression (such as "For someone like me who is so solitary and different") to immerse himself in Mary's emotional world and respond to her sense of loneliness. This mode of expression serves a dual purpose: it not only facilitates Mary's experience of being understood and accepted but also contributes to the progressive construction of Rogers' empathic identity through this interactive methodology. Mary's affirmative response ("Yes, that's exactly it") functions as both a validation of Rogers' empathic understanding and an enhancement of the significance of their interaction. Rogers' first-person expression is based on Mary's preceding utterance ("I'm really lonely"). This method allows for a collaborative construction of meaning within the dialogue. Through ongoing interaction, Rogers and Mary work together to interpret the dialogue's significance, thereby reinforcing Rogers' empathic identity. This method allows for a collaborative construction of meaning within the dialogue. Through ongoing interaction, Rogers and Mary work together to interpret the dialogue's significance, thereby reinforcing Rogers' empathic identity.

In conclusion, the use of first-person expression is essential for psychothe-rapists not only as a means to articulate empathy but also as a critical strategy in the construction of their empathic identity during the interactive process. By employing first-person pronouns, psychotherapists can immerse them-selves alongside clients in the emotional experience, respond to emotional needs, and strengthen the emotional connection.

### 4.4. Continuous Revision of One's Own Utterances

In the interactive process of psycho-therapy, the revision mechanism serves as a pivotal technique for fostering mutual comprehension[33]. By continu-ously refining their utterances, psycho-therapists can more accurately articulate their perspectives and observations, thereby minimizing misunderstandings and miscommunication. This revision not only reflects the psychotherapist's keen perception of the client's individual di-fferences but also dynamically constructs the psychotherapist's identity as an empathizer through the interactive process. The interactivity of revision is manifested in the fact that psychothe-rapists do not unilaterally express em-pathy but gradually adjust their utter-ances through dialogue with the client, ultimately achieving precise matching of emotional expression.

[PCR-1962-19]

- 01 Rogers: Just feeling like sinking, <sinking> deep into those negative emotions, huh? Is it kind of like this?  
 02 Jill: No.  
 03 Rogers: No?  
 04 Jill: (0.6) No. I'm just a bad person. I've always been like this to everyone, and I'll always be like this in the future.  
 05 Rogers: So you feel this way now, huh? That you're completely worthless to everyone forever? These are really bad feelings, as if you feel you have no strengths at all.  
 06 Jill: Yes. ↓That's what the person who went to the city with me the other day told me.

In this exchange, Rogers' initial empathetic response ("sinking deep into those negative emotions") failed to fully

resonate with Jill's emotional state. Jill's explicit rejection ("No") signaled a misalignment between Rogers' interpretation and her psychological reality, which prompted Rogers to recalibrate his response. He reformulated his statement ("I'm just a bad person" and "I'll always be like this in the future"), prompting Rogers to revise his expression based on this preceding utterance. He adjusted his formulation to "You feel that you're completely worth-less to everyone forever." a revision that more accurately mirrored Jill's self-denying emotions and elicited her acknowledgment of being understood ("Yes").

Rogers' adaptive response was directly informed by Jill's prior utterances ("I'm just a bad person" and "I'll always be like this in the future"). This dialogic strategy, which relies on the sequentiality of discourse, enables the mutual construction of meaning. Through this dynamic interplay, Rogers and Jill collaboratively negotiated the significance of their interaction, thereby reinforcing Rogers' identity as an empathizer.

In summation, the continuous revision of one's own utterances is not merely a method for psychotherapists to express empathy but also a crucial instrument for constructing their empathic identity within the interactive process. Through revision, psychotherapists can collaboratively apprehend emotional experiences with clients, respond to emotional needs, and fortify the emotional connection between both parties.

## 5. Conclusion

This study, utilizing Arundale's con-joint co-constituting model of communication, delves into the mechanisms underlying the construction of empathic identity in psychotherapy. The findings reveal that empathic identity is dynamically formed through the interaction between the psychotherapist and the client, rather than being unilaterally constructed. Through strategies such as affirmative responses, paraphrasing the client's statements, employing first-person narratives, and continuously refining discourse, both the psycho-therapist and the client collaboratively participate in the co-construction of empathic identity. This process not only deepens emotional resonance between the two parties but also strengthens the trust relationship.

The theoretical contribution of this study lies in providing a novel per-spective for understanding the dynamic construction of empathic identity, emphasizing the role of interactivity and negotiability in identity formation. Practically, the research results offer guidance for psychotherapists on how to more effectively employ empathic strategies to enhance the quality and efficacy of psychotherapy. Nevertheless, this study is not without limitations. Future research could further explore the application of the conjoint co-constituting model of communication in various psychotherapeutic contexts, as well as how to adapt empathic strategies according to the characteristics of different clients. Additionally, studies could focus on how psychotherapists, through continuous professional development, can improve their empathic abilities and communication skills to better serve their clients.

## Acknowledgments

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my supervisor for her patient guidance and invaluable support through-out this research. Her insightful feedback and

encouragement have not only enhanced the quality of this study but have also profoundly influenced my personal and academic growth. Her mentorship has challenged me to rethink certain perspectives and has ultimately contributed to my development as a more reflective and empathic individual. Without her unwavering commitment and intellectual generosity, this journey would not have been possible.

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