

Exploring Empathy Embedded in Ethics Curricula: A Classroom Inquiry

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Abstract: *Empathy is considered to be a crucial ingredient in social work practice. Research on empathy is abundant although literature describing the teaching and learning of empathy, and in what contexts empathy might be taught best, is less common. The primary aim of this exploratory, classroom-based research undertaken in 2011 was to explore empathy with second year, social work students, thereby building on previous research, and linking it to education and practice. The findings suggest students may acquire a conceptual and definitional understanding of empathy by early in their course, but may need more proactive support to transform that learning into deeper empathy. A key speculation underpinning this exploratory inquiry, that cultivating empathy within an 'ethics' unit might prove more potent than within a 'skills' unit, was not supported. The need for further research into empathy, particularly cross-cultural empathy, is a recommendation of this research.*

Keywords: *Empathy, ethics, social work education, social work practice*

INTRODUCTION

As social workers, to be empathic is to experience the affect, process it, and then take appropriate, empathy-driven action (Gerdes & Segal, 2009, pp. 121-122).

Empathy is defined as vicariously perceiving or feeling the experiences and emotions of another person. Literature on promoting the importance of empathy is plentiful and empathy is considered to be an indispensable ingredient in helping (Alma & Smaling, 2006; Batson, Chang, Orr & Rowland, 2002; Duan & Hill, 1996; Eckermann et al., 2006; Figley, 2002). Yet comprehensive discussion about how to cultivate, teach, and learn empathy is not easily found in the social work literature. Specifically, exploring with social work students what are the issues or contexts that might trigger, or conversely inhibit their empathy and, from their perspectives why this might be the case, is uncommon in the literature. The aim of this article was to illuminate my efforts to further explore and cultivate empathy for improved classroom learning and advanced, empathy-driven social work practice.

Understanding Empathy- History and Definitions

Lipps is attributed with advancing the theory of 'Einfühlung', a German term used in the late 19th century meaning a person's spontaneous projection of feeling into other people and things. In 1909 Titchener coined the term 'empathy', deriving from another German term 'Verstehen' for empathic understanding, and the Greek 'empathia' meaning appreciation of another's pain (Alma & Smaling, 2006; Davis, Yeager & Foster, 2001; Duan & Hill, 1996; Wispe, 1987). For German philosopher Edith Stein (1917, translated in 1989), empathy involved objective tuning-in; deeper, subjective connection; and conveying the combined objective and subjective back to the client in a way that centralised our common humanity. Later, key psychoanalytic theorists such as Kohut (1977) saw important links between introspection (reflection)

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and empathy, and, like Rogers (1956/1992), Kohut thought that empathy was a cornerstone for psychological change.

Western concepts of 'empathy' and 'sympathy' often are considered in tandem in the literature. In social work literature Trevithick (2005) and Boulton (1987) define empathy as 'feeling with' the client, rather than 'feeling for' the client (sympathy). Some authors conceptualise empathy as 'getting into the skin of' another person (Schell & Kayser-Jones, 2007, p. 146), although conceptualizing empathy in this way may be offensive to some Indigenous groups (L. Muller, personal communication, August 27, 2009). Discussing Indigenous health care, Eckermann et al. (2006) stated that empathy and sympathy are closely related, usage in most cultures overlaps, and that empathy is often portrayed 'as walking a mile in another person's shoes' (p. 113).

While use of empathy is most often associated with positive therapeutic outcomes (Hojat, 2007), a common view is that too close an engagement with clients' lived experiences (over empathizing) leads to transference, burnout, or compassion fatigue (Figley, 2002). Other terms used in relation to empathy in the literature include compassion, caring, imagination, kindness, intuition, pity, and emotional intelligence (Davis, 2003; Howe, 2008; Hugman, 2005).

Research on Empathy

Key themes evident in past empathy research include cognitive understanding and motivation, affective capacity and perceptual taking, similarities and differences, and other contextual influences. However some researchers point to the co-existence and multidimensionality of these elements (Duan & Hill, 1996). Key empathy researchers such as Hoffman (1982) and Eisenberg (1982) were interested in the role of altruistic motivation, symbolic cues, a helper's past experiences, perspective taking, and in-group preferences and they noted evidence of children behaving more empathically towards other children of the same race or sex and adults responding more towards others perceived as similar. More recently, researchers focusing on mirror neurons and neural networks in the brain reported similar conclusions (De Vignemont & Singer, 2006; Gutsell & Inzlicht, 2010).

Although empathy in general is a well-researched topic, research is less common in relation to cultural, ethno-cultural, and cross-cultural factors (Rasoal, Eklund, & Hansen, 2011). Empathy research in an Australian cross-cultural context appears to be almost non-existent. Exceptions include Pedersen, Beven, Walker, and Griffiths (2004) and Pedersen and Barlow (2008) who examined prejudice, empathy, and collective guilt. They identified that interventions that induce empathy would likely produce reductions in racial prejudice (Pedersen & Barlow, 2008).

Critiques of Empathy

A review of the empathy literature reveals a number of critiques. Noddings (2003) argued that empathy, defined as 'projecting' oneself into another's shoes, reflects a western, masculine rationale, and Noddings prefers the term 'caring', and the idea of 'receiving' another person's experiences. Harris and Foreman-Peck (2004) argued that our empathy is informed by what people generally do and feel in such circumstances combined with our own personal life experiences. Therefore, empathy might not be elicited if the experiences seemed outside what the helper knows, can understand, or can imagine. However, Lather (2009) questioned whether that

commonly understood act of empathy was legitimate if the listener must be able to recall similar personal experiences, that is, centre themselves, before giving empathy. Furthermore, giving empathy may mirror dominant social and cultural norms and ideologies where only certain groups deserve our empathy (Bryant & Clark, 2006; Krulewitz, 1982, cited in Duan & Hill, 1996). A small number of authors speculate on an increasing erosion of empathy in modern society, driven by dominant market-driven ideologies, although not all authors agree (Bennett, 2001; White, Perlman, Fantone, & Kumagai, 2010).

Teaching and Learning Empathy

According to Pike, Bennett, and Chang (2004), before graduating as social workers, students need to acquire basic practice skills including empathy. While empathy is mentioned very frequently in the helping literature, how to teach and learn empathy is less readily articulated. Well-known psychologist Carl Rogers described empathy as a skill that can be taught alongside positive regard and a non-judgemental, client-centred approach (Rogers, 1956/1992). With specific regard to tertiary students learning empathy, Pedersen and Barlow (2008) identified that psychology students need a safe space to speak about prejudices and enhance empathy, Furman (2006) recommended poetry writing to cultivate social work students' empathy, and White et al. (2010) reported on a successful project with medical students designed to help learners incorporate the viewpoints of patients.

Empathy and Ethics

Dolgoff, Loewenberg, and Harrington (2009, p. 8) define professional 'ethics', from the Greek *ethos*, meaning custom or habit that helps guide practitioners to act ethically when working through value conflicts that can impact on helping relationships. Some authors note past separation of core *values*, such as moral reasoning, goodness, autonomy, and impartiality, from *emotions*, while Noddings and Tong speak of an 'ethic on caring' (Hugman, 2005; Maxwell & Racine, 2010; Noddings, 2003; Tong, 1997). Maxwell and Racine (2010) recommend a combined approach to teaching values, ethics and empathy to reduce the likelihood of students' acquiring a superficial notion of empathy, although they caution against over-generalizing about when empathy is absent. Hojat (2007) links empathy and ethics but cautions that empathic, helping relationships may increase the potential for unethical boundary crossings. Similarly, Van den Hoofdakker (cited in Alma & Smaling, 2006) suggests that empathy is not intrinsically good, and that accurately identifying vulnerabilities in others can make them more vulnerable to unethical practice.

As a social work educator it occurred to me that empathy had been given insufficient attention in my 'skills' unit in the past, and in 2009 I undertook a classroom inquiry exploring empathy (Gair, 2009; 2010). Most recently I pondered whether embedding empathy within a 'values and ethics' unit would better facilitate students' learning of empathy. In 2011 I undertook a second classroom empathy exploration, this time embedded within ethics curricula.

METHODOLOGY

This inquiry used a qualitative, postmodern, phenomenological approach (exploring deep, reflective ways that individuals create meaning and understanding)

to help students describe their definitions and understandings of empathy and allow me to ponder them (Davis, 2003; Fook, 1999; Schutz, 1972). The approach is underpinned by adult life long learning (Ramsden, 1992), and by critical thinking and narrative approaches to transformative learning (Garrison, 1991; Mezirow, 2003), through use of a method of vignettes and writing. Therefore this inquiry sought both research and reflective learning outcomes. The research question underpinning this inquiry was: Would exploring empathy within an 'ethics and values' unit help illuminate how empathy might be best taught in social work education? The specific aims of this classroom-based inquiry were: i) to explore and reflect on teaching and learning empathy embedded within an ethics and values curriculum, and ii) to use the findings to inform social work education. In particular, students' definitions of, conceptual understandings of and reasoning about their empathy as related to the presented vignettes were important points of exploration.

While a slightly larger number of students participated in the classroom-based workshop (22), a final sample of 19 self-selected into this research study. The students were all distance education (DE), second year, social work students enrolled at a regional Australian university who were attending on-campus block workshops. To protect their anonymity, no identifying information was requested from students. The class was predominantly a cohort of mature-age women (over 25 years old); most students were non-Indigenous Australians; there was a small number of male students (4) and a small number of younger female students who had enrolled in university studies in the year following completion of secondary school. This group profile reflects our larger social work student body and our graduate profile. The small amount of content on empathy that normally was taught in the interpersonal communication skills workshop remained there (scheduled prior to this workshop), while the focused, comprehensive content included in 2009 as a part of previous, classroom-based empathy research, was transferred from the skills workshop to the values and ethics workshop, amid content over three days of exercises, DVD's and group discussion on professional values and ethics.

Beginning the empathy workshop, all students were given consent forms and information sheets that explained that they could opt into the study at the completion of the class by handing in their work; otherwise it represented a scheduled values and ethics workshop for them (University Human Ethics approval was gained to conduct the study). First, students were asked to write a definition of empathy. Students then were presented with comprehensive information about empathy. The information presented in the workshop duplicated the literature review discussed above, and consisted of key points and arguments from the literature, historical research and philosophical writing about empathy, contrasting definitions from social work, health and medical literature, the 'skill' of empathy, critiques and theories from a multidisciplinary selection of empathy literature, and available literature on cross cultural empathy including definitions from Indigenous Australian health literature.

Finally, they were given four written vignettes. The four real life vignettes were: a narrative from an inter-country adoptee describing his grief, felt rejection, and perceived, inadequate adoptive parenting (Harris, 2006); two brief narratives about family violence, one depicting a victim's and one a perpetrator's story (Department of Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Policy and Development, 2000); and a narrative about a father's grief over his stillborn son (Phellps, 2011). These factual vignettes were chosen for their range of explicitness of emotion, the gender and cultural mix of

the characters for an Australian practice context, and their links to past and present biases, stigma and stereotypes within contemporary society. In a previous, aforementioned study in 2009, some social work students had identified a lack of empathy for an Aboriginal elder's narrative and an adoption-related (birth mother) vignette, and also identified perceived difficulties giving empathy to perpetrators of abuse (Gair, 2010). Therefore, I was interested to further explore these topics although not necessarily to duplicate that previous study. Vignettes are a common tool in education and research, although most often vignettes are constructed fiction, based on life-like circumstances, rather than factual vignettes as were used here. Hughes (1998) notes that vignettes are "stories... that make reference to perceptions, beliefs and attitudes" (p. 381), and Barter and Renold (1999) suggest that vignettes are useful in researching sensitive topics.

After writing and sharing their definitions and receiving comprehensive content about empathy, students were asked *to read and reflect on whether they felt empathy (Yes or No) for characters in the four vignettes* (students were asked two different questions about vignette one, pertaining to the adoptee and the adoptive parents); *and what was their meaning-making of their own responses*. Only students willing to participate in the research submitted their written work ($N = 19$).

FINDINGS

Defining Empathy

Empathy, as noted earlier, is often portrayed as 'walking a mile in another person's shoes' (Boulton, 1987; Eckermann et al, 2006), and although Noddings (2003) rejected this notion, many students made reference to that familiar adage. The quotes below exemplify the definitions written by most students:

Empathy is trying to walk a mile in another person's shoes- viewing the world, and situations from their perspective to fully appreciate, try to understand what the person's going through, feeling, experiencing (student 8).

Empathy is another person's or living being's pain, anguish, fear, or loss. Connecting on an emotional level that arouses feelings of compassion. Connecting on an experience level also impacts on empathy. Arouses very emotional feelings (student 16).

Empathy is looking at a situation from a different person's perspective, putting yourself in another person's shoes, trying to imagine how that person is feeling and what they are possibly thinking (student 4).

In contrast to the above definitions of empathy that feature feelings, relating and understanding, this student's definition suggested a more surface, or objective problem-based approach that was otherwise uncommon in students' empathy definitions:

Empathy in some cases, regarding with clients, is considering as our own (the) problems and thinking what we will do if we are in the same situation (student 5).

The notion of surface and deep empathy is revisited later in this paper.

Students Who Said They Could Empathize

Only 6 students empathized with characters in all the vignettes. Thirteen students ($N = 19$) identified that they could not empathize with at least one of the scenarios, although they could empathize with the other vignettes. Four (4) students could not empathize with multiple scenarios. In total there were 22 responses where 'No' was their answer. Ten students could not empathize with vignette one (adoptive parents), representing the highest number of 'No' responses, or stated differently, this was the character that attracted the least empathy. Vignette one (adoptive parents) attracted 2 'No' responses, vignette two (victim) attracted 2 'No' responses, vignette three (family violence perpetrator) attracted 5 'No' responses, and vignette four (stillbirth) received a total of 3 'No' responses.

Immediately below, students offer their meaning-making about when they nominated they could empathize with the characters in the vignettes:

Vignette one (adoptive parents):

I know that cultural differences need to be acknowledged. The child must have felt so very alone, being different and having no adequate support (student 8).

Vignette one (adoptive parents):

They tried to protect and do the right thing by the child. Easy to look back in hindsight and realize the wrong choice was made (student 12).

Vignette two (family violence victim):

Sounds like she has been brave to strive for another life after leaving DV. I feel distress to think that she has been placed in unsafe poor quality housing where she and her child still do not feel safe (student 1).

Vignette three (family violence perpetrator):

Yes- the person in the scenario was in a pickle about doing right and wrong. He gave in and did what he believed was expected of him in his culture but ended up getting into trouble and going to jail (student 15).

Vignette four (father of stillborn baby)

I do feel empathy because I know what it is like to lose a child (student 3).

Students Who Said They Could not Empathize

The students offered quite diverse explanations about why they answered 'No' to whether they felt empathy for the characters in the vignettes:

Vignette one (adoptee):

I think what I feel is more like sympathy. I feel sorry that she had that experience but without more information- cannot imagine...I wouldn't feel empathy if I didn't believe it. I need more discussion (student 18).

Vignette one (adoptive parents):

No I never felt empathy for the parents at all they should have never told the kid that he will be taken away if they loved him (student 2).

Vignette two (family violence victim):

I think (I) didn't feel empathy for her because she already got a house and she is not at all satisfied with it... a suffering person but she's got a baby with her and she starts to drink too much- is really not good for both of them (student 5).

Vignette three (family violence perpetrator):

Because we all have the freedom to make choices. And he chose to do something even though he knew it was bad (student 9).

Vignette four (father of stillborn baby)

No - I struggle to feel I can fully empathise as I have never had the experience (student 8).

Taking a Deeper Look

It occurred to me that the vast majority of students demonstrated that they could respond to a task requiring them to write a meaningful definition of empathy. However, their subsequent answers belied any deeper understanding or learning about empathy. With a more discerning lens applied to their responses, it seemed that some students seemed to forget or disconnect from their definitions of empathy almost immediately after writing them. There appear to be many instances in the data of this 'empathy gap' between students' defining and giving empathy. For example, one student defined empathy as follows:

Empathy is a skill that allows someone to be able to understand another person's experience ... an attempt to deeply understand how the other person must feel (student 17).

Yet that definition was immediately followed by a 'No' empathy response to vignette one with this explanation (adoptee):

No, I would listen to try to understand but I can't relate- I would only be able to give feeling to the words the story describes.

Another student offered an insightful definition:

Empathy involves feeling another person's or living being's pain, anguish, fear, or loss. Connecting on an emotional level that arouses feelings of compassion.... Arouses very emotional feelings (student 16);

followed by a 'No' response to vignette one (adoptive parents) with this explanation:

I do not hold a lot of empathy for the adoptive parents as they made a choice to adopt a child from a different cultural background. They have not been supportive or shown compassion for a child who clearly has mental health issues and cultural issues.

Here is a second example relating to the same vignette; first a definition:

For me empathy means looking out for someone else when they are doing something by putting yourself in that person's shoes (student 10).

This definition was followed by a 'No' response with this explanation:

Because they should have paid more attention to the child or maybe they were not good at communicating to the child or maybe they just want adoption money.

In the next example a detailed definition is followed by 'No' responses to two different vignettes (family violence victim and perpetrator narratives):

Empathy is showing an appreciation and concern for a client's circumstances. It involves being genuine about the feeling or expression you display to the client as the object is to gain their confidence and trust to enable change or the ability to assist effectively (student 14);

followed by a 'No' response to the victim vignette with this explanation:

No, when you reach the point when you could die or persons' lives become at risk then I think it is quite rational to assume that the right to life supersedes other ideas;

and this explanation to the family violence perpetrator vignette:

I would need to seek supervision or work in a different field. I have strong values about a man hurting a woman.

Finally, this definition:

Empathy is trying to walk a mile in another person's shoes- viewing the world, and situations from their perspective... try to understand what the person's going through, feeling, experiencing (student 8);

was followed by a 'No' response to vignette four (stillbirth) with this explanation:

I struggle to feel I can fully empathise as I have never experienced anything similar to this.

Harris and Foreman-Peck (2004) identified that empathy is informed by what the helper thinks people might do in such circumstances combined with their own life experiences, and that empathy might not be elicited if the experience seems outside what the helper knows or can imagine. In a range of responses, whether those responses represented a 'No' response (see the last example above, or a 'Yes' response (for example 'As a parent I know that raising children is a hard job and can only try to imagine ...'), students appeared to draw on, at least in part, their own past experiences to inform their answers. Clearly this concept of empathy has shortcomings when there are many contexts that social workers will not have personally experienced.

When comparing the above definitions to those definitions offered by students who gave 'Yes' responses ($n = 6$) to all vignettes, there appears to be very little discernable difference.

However, what may be evident, although admittedly this sub-group is very small ($n = 6$), is that some students appeared to theorize in a compassionate, reflective way that enacted their definitions, perhaps asking themselves what else might be happening, how else could it be understood, or what might be influencing their understanding. For example:

Maybe the parents were trying to protect the child ... and because it was a new and different situation ... (student 4);

I think it is easy to read this article and condemn but... (student 13);

As a consequence of the character's racialisation process he has become involved in family violence, sounds like now he is beginning to see different perspectives that may enable him to make different choices (student 1).

DISCUSSION

Mezirow (2003) defined transformative learning as learning that transforms assumptions, meanings, reasoning, or perspectives to make them more inclusive, open, and reflective. Mezirow (2003) identified that it includes learning skills, sensitivities, and insights, having an open mind, and learning to listen empathically. In considering students' comments above, it may be that while some students were familiar with how to define empathy, they subsequently appeared to forget to enact that empathy, and instead reverted to past experiences, understandings, or personal values to inform their empathy. According to Meyer and Land (2005), while "the deep learning of Otherness implies abilities of empathetic engagement and self reflexivity" (p. 383, citing Cousin, 2003 and Williamson, 1992), there are risks of 'mimicry' and 'faking it' without students full engagement with the personally transformative potential of empathy.

Of interest, some students' responses may hint at rhetoric of deserving or undeserving, for example, regarding the adoptive parents in vignette one: '*they made a choice to adopt a child from a different cultural background*', and they '*...should have paid more attention to the child*'. Admittedly, vignette one is told from an adoptee's perspective. Nevertheless, this factor seems to be a somewhat inadequate explanation for students' lack of empathy towards adoptive parents. Trotter (1998, as cited in Stitt & Gibbs, 2007) illuminated the existence of a deserving/undeserving discourse inhibiting empathy when he found non-abusing mothers of sexually-abused children were treated with a dismissive lack of empathy (mother blaming) by professionals. A different but related explanation is that students were aware that perceiving cross-cultural adoption as an acceptable social policy conflicted with a human rights stance in Australia of not removing children from their culture, although this was not a nominated explanation (Hollingsworth, 2003). Clearly these are complex issues. Kirton (1999), in seeking to explore perceived 'political correctness' influencing second year social work students' support of 'transracial' adoptions, found a 'great divergence' of views, and recommended that more dialogue during social work education could 'lessen the extremes' (p. 794).

It is an unexpected finding that the family violence perpetrator narrative attracted the second lowest empathy response rather than the lowest, as was tentatively speculated. In a similar aforementioned 2009 study a majority of social work students identified that perpetrators of domestic violence or child abuse were groups with whom they would find it most difficult to empathize and the literature supports such findings. For example, according to Humphries (1999) and others, child protection workers do not work in effective, holistic ways with domestic and family violence, rather they swing in a polarized way between minimizing men's violence and women's experiences of violence, through to demonizing men (Dolgoff, Loewenberg, & Harrington, 2009; Milner, 2004). Naming and addressing domestic and family violence can be a controversial issue in Australia, and mainstream approaches that are useful in addressing non-Indigenous domestic violence have been identified as problematic for justice, healing, and reduction of violence against Aboriginal women (Bell & Nelson, 1989; Cripps, 2010). In the case of the family violence vignettes used here, it was evident that the victim and perpetrator characters were Indigenous, and this factor might have influenced students' perceptions. As conjectured by Kirton (1999), 'political correctness' can be an operating factor, and political correctness, or even misplaced cultural empathy, may have informed students' 'Yes' responses to the family violence perpetrator narrative. For example, one student responded:

Yes- the person in the scenario ... did what he believed was expected of him in his culture but ended up ... going to jail (student 15).

Future targeted research on teaching empathy, particularly in relation to cross-cultural adoptions, family violence, and more broadly, cross-cultural therapeutic engagement, seem warranted. Indeed, while acknowledging that empathy for all persons, by all persons, in all situations might not be possible (Tong, 1997), nevertheless the 'No' responses in this study are worthy of deeper reflection.

Pondering the 'empathy gap' identified in the findings above, between students' demonstrated objective learning of what is empathy, and a deeper, reflective, enacted empathy, Ramsden (1992) may offer some direction. Ramsden (1992) notes that learning is less about deep or surface learners and more about different ways adult learners are facilitated to learn specific content in a deep or surface way. A surface approach requires students to learn (memorize) words, concepts and tasks unreflectively as generalizable, external, objective learning. In contrast, deep learning requires students to try to *understand*, and engage in a reflective, internal process that models and reflects what is an "essential part of their work as professionals" (Ramsden, 1992, p. 50). It would seem self-evident that a deep approach to learning empathy would be preferable to a surface approach, in order to produce effective practitioners. Such positioning of empathy, as requiring a reflective, inner process, aligns with the work of Stein (1917, translated in 1989) who recommended objective listening, followed by deeper subjective connection through listening to the story told, and then conveying back these combined objective and subjective responses to the person in a way that centralized a common humanity rather than a common experience.

There appear to be identifiable similarities between the work of Stein on deep listening, the concept of transformative learning as discussed by Mezirow (2003), and deep and surface learning as identified by Ramsden (1992). Moreover, it is noted here that these concepts have much in common with the concept and process of

mindfulness. Such literature was not introduced to students at the time of this inquiry and admittedly the term ‘mindfulness’ in some ways “has been fraught with the same vagaries ... as empathy” (Block-Lerner, Adair, Plumb, Rhatigan, & Orsillo, 2007, p. 506). Nevertheless, it is concluded here, after reviewing such literature as a part of my own reflective learning, that deeper listening facilitated through mindfulness approaches, in a way that incorporated deep learning models, may prove successful in cultivating greater empathy (Wong, 2004). The work of Gerdes and Segal (2009), noted in the opening quote, reflects some of these aspects in a three level model of affective and cognitive responses informing our empathic concern.

Overall, it would seem detrimental to client groups if some students are forgetting, ‘feigning’ (Sherborne, 2011, p. 20), or ‘faking’ their empathy (Meyer & Land, 2005, p. 383) because educators have not facilitated a deeper, more transformative empathy. Highly desirable are graduates who can respond in flexible, open ways that involve a “deepening of the human empathic response” (Ridley & Lingle, cited in Rasoal et al., 2011, p. 6). When considering the findings from this empathy project, together with findings reported from a 2009 study (Gair, 2009), teaching empathy within a skills unit may be the better context (Erera, 1997), although it seems relevant to consider ethics and empathy as interrelated. More research in this area may be useful. It is acknowledged here that limitations of this inquiry may include the small, exploratory sample, and as such its limited generalizability, and the limited data collected regarding the characteristics of the participants that may have limited the richness of the analysis.

My own critical reflection about how to advance students’ empathy is ongoing. Nevertheless, I recommend increased opportunities, including within assessment, for social work students to explore empathy through narratives, shared personal stories, and vignettes (Furman, 2006). Providing cognitive, experiential, and perspective-taking opportunities for students to explore how they might empathically, mindfully, and compassionately engage with diverse client groups in practice are recommendations from this research.

CONCLUSION

A review of the empathy literature, together with the findings from this explorative classroom-based research, suggests that teaching and learning empathy needs much more emphasis in social work education. While acknowledging the limitations of this inquiry, it may be that the notion of ‘walking a mile in another’s shoes’ may be unhelpful if students do not advance beyond that superficial adage before entering professional practice. In particular, educators may need to advance students’ learning beyond a surface understanding of empathy, in order that they gain deeper listening and empathic capacity. A comprehensive look at the empathy literature with students in the classroom, use of vignettes, and proactive use of deep, transformative learning approaches may be useful in this quest. Future research into many aspects of teaching and learning empathy, including empathy for cross-cultural understandings, seems justified.

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