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Hearts and Minds: Aspects of Empathy and Wellbeing in Social Work Students

Louise Grant

Although empathy is critical to social work practice, the extent to which it can be measured, nurtured or taught is hotly debated. Furthermore, definitions of empathy are typically one-dimensional referring to the ability to adopt the perspective of others in order to understand their feelings, thoughts or actions. Such definitions do not adequately reflect the realities of empathy in the social work context or recognise its potential to lead to distress. This study utilises data from 359 social work students to examine relationships between several dimensions of empathy (i.e. perspective taking, concern and distress), reflective ability and wellbeing with a view to using the findings to develop evidence-based interventions to help staff develop appropriate empathic responses to service users' experiences. Whilst students reported fairly high levels of empathic concern, they also disclosed considerable empathic distress. Some evidence was found that reflective ability might protect social work students from empathic distress. Findings suggest that students require support to develop their empathic and reflective skills to effectively manage the emotional demands of practice. The use of techniques such as mindfulness and experiential learning for enhancing such skills is explored.

Keywords: Reflection; Students; Stress

Introduction

Empathy is a key factor in all ‘helping’ relationships. The ability to engage with people in an empathic manner has been identified as a fundamental aspect of the social worker’s role (College of Social Work, 2012). Early research by Rosenthal (1977) found that practitioners who were better able to identify with the emotions of others were more successful in their work as well as in their personal lives. More recently, social workers’ empathy has been found to have strong therapeutic effects on service users’ physical, mental and social wellbeing (Gerdes, Lietz, & Segal, 2011; Morrison, 2007). Although empathy is undoubtedly a key attribute for social workers and other helping
professionals, the risk of being emotionally over-involved with service users has been identified as being associated with a range of negative outcomes such as psychological distress, compassion fatigue and burnout (Morissette, 2004; Thomas & Otis, 2010). It has also been argued that over-identification with service users’ traumatic experiences may disrupt the world view of helping professionals and have a negative impact on levels of tolerance, self-belief and interpersonal relationships more generally (Pearlman & Saakvitne, 1995) leading to impaired professional judgement and decision making (Bride, Radey, & Figley, 2007). Clearly, this has serious negative implications for the quality of service provision as well as the wellbeing of social workers themselves.

In 2007, Rogers used the term ‘accurate empathy’ to refer to the ability of caring professionals to communicate empathic understanding whilst avoiding adverse emotional consequences from the encounter. More recently, it has been argued that social workers also need to develop accurate empathy to enhance their emotional resilience (Kinman & Grant, 2011). Despite the general opinion that empathy is a positive attribute and crucial to optimum practice, it remains under-explored in social work education and practice (Barlow & Hall, 2007; Harr & Moore, 2011). Although it is evident that empathy can have negative as well as positive outcomes, little is known about the abilities that underpin accurate empathy and how these may be developed. Moreover, the implications of accurate and inaccurate empathy for the wellbeing of social workers has not yet been examined. This paper initially reviews conceptualisations of empathy and highlights the benefits of utilising a multi-dimensional model. It reports the findings of a study of social work students, that explored aspects of empathy, which examines relationships between dimensions of empathy, empathic distress and psychological distress more generally. The role played by reflective ability in underpinning accurate empathy is also explored. It is argued that the findings have the potential to enrich the social work curriculum and enhance the wellbeing of social workers as well as the quality of their professional practice.

**Empathy**

Definitions of empathy typically consider it to be an ability or a trait that allows a person to adopt the perspective of others in order to understand their feelings, thoughts or actions (Hogan, 1969). One of the most frequently cited definitions of empathy in the social work literature is that of Trevithick (2005, p. 81), which considers it as the capacity to

\[ \ldots \text{put ourselves in the person's place in the hope that we can feel and understand another person's emotions, thoughts, actions and motives. Empathy involves trying to understand, as carefully and sensitively as possible the nature of another person's experience, their own unique point of view and what meaning this conveys for that individual.} \]

Whilst this is a useful starting point to explore how the empathic process should work in practice and the effort that this might entail, it fails to acknowledge the potential negative implications of empathy if emotional boundaries are breached or if the awareness of the potential negative impact of others’ experiences on the social worker is
not adequately considered. This concern has been highlighted by Morrison (2007) who, although identifying empathy as a fundamental component in building successful relationships in social work practice, argues that ‘it is increasingly apparent that the most troubling and intractable situations exist when performance difficulties occur in the context of staff who lack accurate empathy, self-awareness and self-management skills’ (p. 247). There is indeed evidence that some social workers can struggle with the emotional impact of professional practice which can impair psychological wellbeing and lead to compassion fatigue, empathy burnout, depersonalisation and emotional disengagement (Harr & Moore, 2011; Leeson, 2010). Reflecting Morrison’s concerns highlighted above, it has been argued that the social work curriculum does not pay enough attention to the potential negative effects of empathy (Harr & Moore, 2011). Trainees are, therefore, frequently unaware of what might be considered accurate and inaccurate empathy which can impair the development of emotional resilience which is required to enhance their wellbeing and longevity in the profession.

There is evidence that many social work students are motivated to enter the profession from personal experiences, either as a victim of a traumatic event or fulfilling a caring role in their family. Research by MacRitchie and Leibowitz (2010) found that social workers who experienced childhood trauma, and who are subsequently required to empathise with distressed service users, are more susceptible to personal distress and secondary trauma. Interestingly, the study found that social workers who demonstrated greater empathy to service users were particularly susceptible. The authors suggest that social workers in such situations should be made aware that a tendency towards over-empathising with service users may invoke personal distress, and that they may need to manage their emotional reactions carefully and seek support through supervision.

The importance of helping social work students manage their empathic responses more appropriately is further highlighted by evidence that many experience psychological distress during training (Collins, Coffey, & Morris, 2010; Kinman & Grant, 2011; Wilks & Spivey, 2010). Clearly, insight into how the ‘emotional curriculum’ may be enhanced is required in order to prepare social work students for the emotional impact of professional practice and for the potential negative consequences of an inaccurate empathic response for their own wellbeing as well as the service they provide.

**Conceptualisations of Empathy in Social Work**

The social work dictionary defines empathy, rather simplistically and perhaps idealistically, as ‘the act of perceiving, understanding, experiencing, and responding to the emotional state and ideas of another person’ (Barker, 2003). Definitions of empathy that have emerged from the psychological literature consider it to be a more complex, multi-dimensional construct. Davis (1983) conceptualised empathy as encompassing three inter-linked components comprising cognitive, affective and behavioural elements: perspective taking (spontaneous attempts to adopt the perspectives of other people); empathic concern (feelings of warmth, compassion and concern for others);
and personal distress (feelings of anxiety and discomfort resulting from the negative experiences of others). By recognising that empathy can have negative as well as positive outcomes, this approach acknowledges (albeit implicitly) the notion of accurate and inaccurate empathy. This conceptualisation will be used in the present study.

The work of Rogers (2007) has been particularly influential in informing conceptualisations of empathy utilised in the social work literature. This approach also acknowledges implicitly the potential for negative outcomes of empathic processes as Rogers argued that a practitioner is required to imagine that they are experiencing the world of the client as if they were that person. The ‘as if’ facet is crucial, as accurate empathy involves the maintenance of an emotional boundary between helping professionals and service users which provides protection from personal distress when sensitive information is shared. Similarly, research conducted by Thomas and Otis (2010) found that compassion fatigue and burnout is not caused by witnessing the distress of service users or showing care or compassion towards them, but by the lack of an emotional boundary or a failure to process and contain the feelings that the situation evokes. Gerdes et al. (2011, p. 116) suggest that accurate empathy in the context of social work has three main features:

(i) affective sharing: being mindful of the service user’s experience and conscious of the barriers to this awareness;
(ii) self–other awareness: a sense of self, separate from the service user; and
(iii) self-emotion: the conscious effort to control personal emotional reactions.

Several models of empathy have been developed. Some focus purely on behavioural elements (for example, how empathy is demonstrated in nursing practice: Reynolds, 2000), some concentrate on emotional aspects (e.g. Mehrabian & Epstein, 1972), whilst others endeavour to capture the cognitive elements (e.g. by measuring medical students’ attitudes to physicians empathy: Hojat & Mangione, 2001). Davis’ (1980) multi-dimensional model focuses on the cognitive and emotional elements of empathy, comprising perspective taking and empathic concern. It is argued that this broader conceptualisation has greater potential to provide insight into the factors that underpin accurate empathy and which are likely to threaten wellbeing.

As well as exploring empathic concern and perspective taking, this study examines the role played by reflective ability in predicting empathic distress and psychological distress more generally. A key element of reflective practice is the ability to communicate the dynamic between our own feelings and thoughts, particularly in terms of emotion management, and how these shape professional practice. To ensure that empathic reactions are authentic, social workers are required to reflect effectively during and following an encounter with a service user, be aware of their own emotional reactions to a situation, and process and contain these feelings. The ability to read the emotions of others whilst remaining in touch with one’s own feelings is an important aspect of reflective practice. It could be argued, therefore, that reflective ability is likely to be a key element in fostering and maintaining accurate empathy. The concept of
‘empathic reflection’, or the ability to understand the emotional responses of others and use cognitive skills to process these responses (Aukes, Geertsma, Cohen-Schotanus, Zwierstra, & Slaets, 2007), may be particularly useful in this regard.

Summary and Aims of Study

It has been argued that social workers need to develop accurate empathy in order to safeguard their personal wellbeing and enhance their professional judgement and practice. As yet, however, little research has examined the notion of accurate empathy, the factors that underpin it and the implications for wellbeing in social work students. This study examines these issues. It is argued that the utilisation of a multidimensional model of empathy, and an examination of how these factors relate to empathic distress and psychological wellbeing more generally, will provide greater insight into what may be considered accurate empathy. This, in turn, has the potential to inform the development of an emotional curriculum for social work students that has the potential to build resilience for practice. This study, therefore, utilised a multidimensional model of empathy supplemented by aspects of reflective ability, to examine levels of empathy and associated competencies in social work trainees. It further examined inter-relationships between these competencies and empathic distress and psychological distress.

Method

Design

A cross-sectional, correlational design was utilised.

Participants

A sample of 359 trainee social work students studying at two UK universities (84% female) completed an online questionnaire. Students in the first and second years of study were contacted by email and invited to participate in the research. Ages ranged from 19 to 54 with a mean age of 33.9 (SD = 8.60). The majority of the sample (79%) identified as White British. Some 48% of the sample were first-year students, with the remainder being in their second year. All participants had experienced regular contact with service users during a recent social work placement. The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical requirements of the British Psychological Society and approved by the University of Bedfordshire Ethics Committee. Emails were sent to students inviting participation and providing a link to the online questionnaire. No names or other identifying features of participants were recorded.

Measures

Several measures were utilised in this study.
Empathy
Davis’ (1983) 21-item multi-dimensional measure was utilised. This scale comprises three dimensions: perspective taking (which assesses the ability to adopt the perspectives of others); empathic concern (feelings of warmth, compassion and concern for others); and empathic distress (anxiety and discomfort that may result from an empathic encounter). Items in the perspective taking subscale include ‘I sometimes find it hard to see things from another person’s point of view’; the empathic concern items include, ‘I often have concerned feelings for people less fortunate than me’; and the personal distress items include statements such as ‘Being in a tense emotional situation scares me’. Responses were obtained on a five-point scale ranging from 1 = ‘Does not describe me well’ to 5 = ‘Describes me very well’. Higher scores represent higher levels of perspective taking, empathic concern and personal distress. Cronbach’s alpha values are: perspective taking = 0.87; empathic concern = 0.84; and empathic distress = 0.79.

Reflection
A scale developed by Aukes et al. (2007) was utilised which measures three aspects of reflection: personal reflection (or the ability to take into consideration the situation of others); empathic reflection (openness to different ways of thinking, contextual understanding and appraisal); and reflective communication (the ability to clarify and create meaning through reflection and communicate this to others). Items include ‘I am aware of the possible emotional impacts of information on others’ and ‘I can empathise with someone else’s situation’. The measure uses a five-point scale ranging from ‘strongly disagree’ to ‘strongly agree’, with higher scores representing stronger reflective ability across all three domains. Cronbach’s alpha values are: personal reflection = 0.87; empathic reflection = 0.72; and reflective communication = 0.79.

Psychological distress
The 12-item General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12: Goldberg & Williams, 1988) was used. An example of an item in this scale is ‘Have you recently been feeling unhappy and depressed’, with potential responses rated on a four-point scale ranging from ‘Not at all’ to ‘Much more than usual’. Higher scores denote higher levels of psychological distress and lower scores represent higher levels of psychological wellbeing. The Cronbach’s alpha value is 0.88.

Findings
No significant differences were found between the responses of first- and second-year students so the data were pooled. The descriptive data for the measures utilised are shown in Table 1.

As can be seen, social work students reported generally high levels of perspective taking and empathic concern (3.93 and 4.09 on a five-point scale, respectively). The overall level of empathic distress reported was moderate (3.24 on a five-point scale). In terms of reflective abilities, students rated themselves fairly highly on the self-reflection dimension.
whereas levels of self-reported empathic reflection and reflective communication were somewhat lower (3.05 and 3.02, respectively).

Inter-relationships between the dimensions of the empathy and reflection subscales, together with psychological distress, were examined. Significant positive associations were found between empathic perspective taking and the three dimensions of reflection: self-reflection ($r = 0.42, p < 0.001$); empathic reflection ($r = 0.23, p < 0.001$); and reflective communication ($r = 0.26, p < 0.001$). A similar pattern of relationships emerged between empathic concern and aspects of reflection but, with the exception of self-reflection ($r = 0.3, p < 0.001$) the magnitude of the correlations was stronger than those found with empathic perspective taking (i.e. empathic reflection: $r = 0.47, p < 0.001$ and reflective communication: $r = 0.44, p < 0.001$). Empathic concern and perspective taking were negatively related to empathic distress ($r = -0.22, p < 0.001$ and $r = -0.25, p < 0.001$, respectively).

All three aspects of reflection had negative associations with empathic distress, with particularly strong relationships emerging with empathic reflection ($r = -0.32, p < 0.001$) and reflective communication ($r = -0.39, p < 0.001$) and a weaker but nonetheless significant relationship emerging with self-reflection ($r = 0.36, p < 0.001$). A significant positive association was found between empathic distress and psychological distress ($r = 0.22, p < 0.01$). Finally, self-reflection ($r = -0.26, p < 0.001$) and empathic reflection ($r = -0.20, p < 0.01$) were negatively associated with psychological distress.

### Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<td>Empathic concern</td>
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<td>0.58</td>
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<tr>
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<td>4.20</td>
<td>3.24</td>
<td>0.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-reflection</td>
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<td>5.00</td>
<td>3.66</td>
<td>0.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empathic reflection</td>
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<td>5.00</td>
<td>3.05</td>
<td>1.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflective communication</td>
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<td>3.02</td>
<td>1.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychological distress (GHQ)</td>
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<td>2.50</td>
<td>1.04</td>
<td>0.49</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*(3.66) whereas levels of self-reported empathic reflection and reflective communication were somewhat lower (3.05 and 3.02, respectively).*

**Discussion**

This study has provided insight into the factors that might underpin accurate empathy in social work students and suggestions regarding how this important quality might be enhanced. The cross-sectional correlational design of this study means that the causality cannot be imputed. Nonetheless, the negative relationship between both empathic concern and perspective taking and empathic distress suggests that social work students who endeavour to put themselves in the place of service users in order to understand their feelings, thoughts and actions may be protected from empathic distress and psychological distress more generally. Moreover, social work students who demonstrated stronger reflective abilities were less likely to be empathically distressed. Empathic reflection and reflective communication had particularly strong negative
associations with empathic distress. These findings suggest that reflective abilities may be key factors in protecting students from the negative implications of engaging with service users’ problems for their own wellbeing. A significant positive association was found between empathic distress and psychological distress. This suggests that social work students who become empathically distressed when interacting with service users may also experience impaired psychological wellbeing more generally, although longitudinal research would need to confirm this temporal sequence. Findings also imply that students whose self and empathic reflective abilities are under-developed may be at particular risk.

Levels of self-reported empathy were generally high, indicating that social work students feel able to take the perspective of service users and feel compassion and warmth towards them. Evidence was also found that students typically rate their reflective abilities fairly favourably, but believed that their ability to reflect empathically and communicate with others about their empathic experiences is less well developed. These findings suggest that developing interventions to nurture social work students’ empathic and reflective skills early in their training may ensure that ‘healthy’ empathic concern does not lead to empathic distress. The findings are illustrated in a working model depicted in Figure 1.

As mentioned above, it is acknowledged that the model implies a causality that cannot be established from cross-sectional, correlational data. Further research with a longitudinal design is required in order to test the model over time. Daily diary methodology might be a particularly appropriate medium through which to explore critical incidents from practice where social work students believe they have demonstrated accurate and inaccurate empathy and the impact on their wellbeing and job performance. How empathy and reflective abilities develop through time in response to training and interactions with service users could also be examined through the use of such methodology. This would seem to be particularly appropriate, given the findings from medical education that suggest that levels of empathy amongst doctors decline rather than increase during training (Magalhães, Salgueira, Costa, & Costa, 2011).

The development of ‘accurate empathy’ is vital in order for social workers to make genuine attempts to acknowledge and accept what service users think and feel; there is also evidence that accurate empathy is significantly related to social workers’

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**Figure 1**
emotional resilience and wellbeing (Kinman & Grant, 2011). The findings of the current study suggest that the social work curriculum should place greater focus, not only on helping students develop their perspective taking abilities and empathic concern, but also on considering ways to assist them in developing emotional boundaries between themselves and service users. The findings of this study suggest that the development of self-awareness and emotional regulation via reflective practice is a key mechanism for underpinning this process. It is important for students to appreciate how their empathic reactions can be contained and regulated, so that their practice and personal wellbeing is not adversely affected by any distress they may experience. These findings support those of Decety and Jackson (2004) who found that self-awareness and emotion regulation are the key determinants of ‘accurate empathy’. Likewise, Thomas and Otis (2010) suggest that being able to adopt the position of a ‘detached observer’ helps people develop empathic engagement while minimising adverse outcomes such as burnout and compassion fatigue.

The importance of discussing with students the potential impact of empathic encounters with service users and the need for emotional boundaries has been highlighted in this study. Harr and Moore (2011) also argue that social work educators need to explicitly address the risks of empathic distress and compassion fatigue with social work students at the recruitment stage, as well as during training and pre- and post-practice placements. This seems particularly important in the light of the high levels of psychological distress that have been found in previous studies of social work students (Coffey, Dugdill, & Tattersall, 2004; Kinman & Grant, 2011). Gerdes and Segal (2009) argue that self/other awareness, perspective taking and emotion regulation do not come automatically and can be taught. There is evidence that teaching social work students about emotional responses to practice at an early stage of professional development can result in a decrease in personal distress (Hen & Groshit, 2011). Greater recognition of the potential impact of emotional reactions on the self is vital, alongside the development of specific techniques to enhance reflective abilities, emotional regulation skills and accurate empathy. There does, therefore, seem to be a strong case for the development of an ‘emotional curriculum’ to supplement the academic social work curriculum that highlights the importance of these skills and to help students to identify and utilise appropriate techniques and supportive mechanisms.

This poses a challenge for social work educators as students are frequently reluctant to acknowledge their sometimes overwhelming emotional reactions to the work. Indeed, stigma and fear of judgement often stop social work students from disclosing personal feelings in general and discussing traumatic events in particular (Napoli & Bonifas, 2011). Such experiences may need to be ‘normalised’ in the curriculum and explicit attention paid to ways in which healthy emotional catharsis may be accomplished. As Badger, Royse, and Craig (2008) argue, social workers are faced with an ‘internal tightrope’ between empathic connection and emotional separation with service users, in that they are required to be compassionate but at the same time need to separate themselves from the impact of trauma for self-protection. More research is needed, therefore, to help social work educators manage this paradox through an evidence-based curriculum.
Ways to Enhance Accurate Empathy and Reduce Inaccurate Empathy

According to Gibbons (2011), the literature tends to focus more on the importance of empathy than how it may be accomplished. Social work students are often ‘taught’ empathy, albeit superficially, via the development of communication and counselling skills. Less attention is given, however, to the development of the skills that underpin accurate empathy. Several strategies could be used to cultivate accurate empathy in social work students via enhancing self-knowledge, self-regulation and cognitive understanding through reflection. This paper concludes by focusing on three techniques that might be particularly fruitful: mindfulness, experiential learning and the use of fiction.

Mindfulness

Mindfulness combines meditation, breathing techniques and paying attention to the present moment without judgement to help people change the way they think, feel and act. Many authors (e.g. Beddoe & Murphy, 2004; Gerdes & Segal, 2009; Napoli & Bonifas, 2011) suggest that mindfulness training has the potential to cultivate empathy. There is also evidence that practising mindfulness skills can enhance perspective taking and empathic concern, improve reflective ability (Bolton, 2010), promote emotional regulation (Turner, 2009), enhance resilience (Napoli & Bonifas, 2011), increase compassion satisfaction and decrease burnout (Thomas & Otis, 2010), relieve vicarious trauma (Cunningham, 2004) and improve cultural competence (Kessen & Turner, 2012). Mindfulness therefore, has the potential to enhance accurate empathy.

For mindfulness to be effective, students need to be trained carefully. Mindfulness does not merely aim to enhance concentration or the ability to focus attention on a particular object such as breath. With practice, mindfulness can generate energy and clear headedness, promote a deep insight into the emotional state of ‘self’, and enable a clearer, compassionate and non-judgemental understanding of ‘self’. There is also evidence that practising mindfulness skills can also increase awareness of the differentiation between ‘self’ and ‘other’ (Gerdes & Segal, 2009). As a result, mindfulness could be used to enhance reflective ability and emotion regulation skills thus building reflective abilities and increasing accurate empathy, and reducing the possibility of over-involvement with service users.

Experiential Learning

Experiential learning, through the use of vignettes, service users’ experiences and role play, can be effectively used to improve social work students’ emotion regulation and reflective ability (Cunningham, 2004; Gair, 2011). Such techniques can also be useful in helping students to explore the types of emotions that social workers are likely to experience in practice as well as de-stigmatise the disclosure of emotions in general. Chow, Lam, Leung, Wong, and Chan (2011) found that when students were introduced to a range of different emotional experiences and subsequently discussed them, their reflective abilities were enhanced and their personal distress decreased. It is important to recognise, however, that students should be given sufficient time to develop reflective
communication skills and forge classroom relationships characterised by trust and openness if such techniques are to be successful (Cunningham, 2004).

An experiential approach to enhance accurate empathy in the classroom, developed by the author of this paper and colleagues, involves providing opportunities for students to listen to qualified social workers discuss their emotional reactions to cases and the methods they adopt to manage positive and negative emotional reactions. A series of ‘talking heads’ videos was recorded, featuring three experienced social workers from a range of different backgrounds who discussed a critical incident in their practice. This was designed to help students appreciate that social work will inevitably induce emotional reactions and that reflection on practice aids emotion regulation. After the videos were shown in the classroom, discussions explored how students felt about disclosing personal distress. Some disclosed that, before the discussions, they would have kept their emotional reaction to themselves for fear of being judged negatively and perceived to be unprofessional. This highlights the need for more open conversations about experiencing emotions and feelings in social work, and the importance of reflection to process and regulate emotion. Research is currently underway to evaluate the effectiveness of this technique.

Use of Reading and Writing

There is evidence that the reading of fiction, when combined with critical reflection, can enhance empathic connections (Mar, Oatley, & Peterson, 2009). Reading narratives and then reflecting critically on the stance with which one approaches them, has the potential to broaden one’s emotional repertoire, deepen the awareness of self and other, and increase empathy. Konrad (2010) has used fiction with social work students to explore the assumptions that they bring to their work in order to enhance empathic understandings around grief and loss, and to foster scholarship and reflexivity within a relational learning environment. This approach has the potential to help students learn how to balance empathy and attunement to others with self-awareness and self-care. It is crucial, however, that empathic reactions to fictional narratives are reflected upon critically in the classroom and, as with the other techniques discussed above, this requires the development of learning relationships built on openness and trust (Chow et al., 2011). As well as reading other people’s accounts, Bolton (2010) also argues that writing a narrative of personal experiences as if they were fiction and sharing this with others can enhance reflective ability and empathy in professionals. Developing reflective writing skills to increase accurate empathy and emotional literacy is an area which requires more research. Gair (2013) argues that reading vignettes about peoples’ lives may increase cross-cultural empathy, improve cultural competence and address concerns of a lack of empathy with disadvantaged groups of people.

Strengths and Limitations

This study has provided insight into what might be considered accurate empathy and its implications for the wellbeing of social work students. The findings have the
potential to inform the development of an emotional curriculum to enhance accurate empathy in this context. This curriculum would emphasise the importance of developing emotional literacy, self-regulation and emotion management through reflective practice and other techniques. As with any study, however, there are some limitations. It could be argued that one limitation of this study was that the measures of empathy and reflective abilities utilised were not specific to the social work context. At the time of conducting the research, however, no social work specific measures for empathy existed; indeed there are few previous examples of empathy being systematically measured in social work students. Attempts are underway, however, to develop measures of empathy that are specific to the social work context (Gerdes, Segal, Jackson, & Mullins, 2011) but, as yet, they are not fully developed and validated. Nonetheless, such work has great promise for the future. Future research should examine the role played by demographic differences such as age, gender and culture. The findings of the present study highlight the importance of acknowledging that empathy can have negative as well as positive consequences. These factors may moderate relationships between aspects of empathy, reflective ability and distress and should inform the development of equitable interventions to enhance accurate empathy. Future research should examine the impact of social workers’ emotional regulation abilities and empathic reactions on service users as well as individual social workers. Ways in which the emotional curriculum might be developed in social work should be further considered and its content carefully evaluated.

Conclusion

Accurate empathy is key for social work practice and needs to be developed at an early stage of professional development. The evidence from this study suggests that reflective abilities are crucial for accurate empathy in order to avoid empathic distress. Social work educators need to address the question of ‘how to’ develop accurate empathy in greater depth, beyond the development of communication skills. It is important to recognise that this requires a greater appreciation of the role of reflection as a protective factor in underpinning psychological wellbeing, emotional resilience and potentially improved outcomes for service users. The development of an emotional curriculum using such techniques as mindfulness, experiential learning, and fictional and self-written narratives has the potential to improve the teaching of accurate empathy and ensure that social work students do not become overly distressed by the experiences they encounter in practice.

References


