Students' responses to vignettes featuring cultural differences: Pondering empathy gaps, value judgments, and the promotion of 'partiality' in teaching empathy

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ABSTRACT

The promotion of empathy and non-judgmental helping is familiar discourse in social work education and practice. These concepts are considered to be crucial to effective intervention. The primary aim of qualitative classroom-based research undertaken at a regional Australian university in 2009 and 2011 was to explore the concept of empathy through the use of selected, real life vignettes. Pondering students' responses to two, of a total of eight, vignettes across very similar projects, those vignettes featuring an Aboriginal elder, and inter-country adoption, extends previous discussion of these findings. The combined findings offer suggestion that more proactive engagement on the topic of empathy could transform students' cognitive understanding of empathy and non-judgmental helping, into a mastery of deeper, felt empathy, particularly for working across diverse cultural contexts. Considering the concept of 'partiality' may offer direction in this regard.

Keywords: *Empathy; Social work education; Non-judgmental; Diversity; Partiality*

INTRODUCTION

… the empathic response is not… automatically activated. Rather the emotional cue is evaluated in the context of external and internal information (De Vignemont & Singer, 2008, p.438)

Empathy has been defined as vicariously perceiving or feeling the emotions of another person, although not all researchers and writers are united on how to define or conceptualise empathy. Nevertheless, empathy is a well-researched topic, and literature on promoting the importance of empathy is plentiful. However, comprehensive discussion about how to cultivate social work students' empathy particularly when working across cultures, and what inhibits or impacts upon their empathy, is a deficit in the literature (Furman 2006; Gair 2009). Findings from two, almost identical, small, qualitative classroom-based projects have been reported elsewhere (Gair 2009; 2011). The aim of this article is to extend earlier reported findings by looking across those studies to ponder students' responses to two specific vignettes. This 'second look' at the data invoked my critical reflection on cultural factors influencing empathy. In particular, what hindered some students' empathy, and how to further address any barriers to empathy through education, is explored.

BACKGROUND

Empathy has been identified as a cornerstone in effective helping (Duan and Hill 1996; Batson, Chang, Orr and Rowland 2002; Carse 2005; Alma and Smaling 2006; Eckermann et al. 2006; Hojat 2007; Howe 2008; Pederson, Cethar, and Carlson 2008). An understanding of both cognitive and emotional elements of empathy is said to be vital, to enable social workers to tune into the experiences of others in a conscious or mindful way (Wong 2004). While empathy is mentioned frequently in the helping literature, less literature exists on how to teach and learn empathy for working in culturally respectful ways (Rasoal, Eklund and Hansen 2011).

In recent decades social work educators have promoted culturally sensitive, culturally competent, anti-discriminatory, anti-oppressive and anti-racist approaches to practice, and questioned the uncritical acceptance of social work's western value base (Lee and Green 1999; Dominelli 2008; Furlong and Wight, 2011; Mlcek 2013; Thompson 2006). In social work, learning about racism, whiteness, oppression and effective cross-cultural communication has been identified as essential (Pinderhughes 1989; Abrama and Gibson 2007; Dominelli 2008; Haigh 2009). Yet social work educators have found "themselves struggling to transform strained classroom interactions into a 'teachable moment" to increase students' critical consciousness on such topics (Garcia and Van Soest 1999, p.150). One strategy, according to Pedersen, Crethar and Carlson (2008) is facilitating students' cultural empathy.

Of relevance to the Australian context, Pedersen, et al. (2004) found that inducing empathy could produce reductions in students' prejudice and racism towards Aboriginal Australians. As an Australian social work educator working in a region with a high population of Indigenous peoples, it occurred to me that cultural and cross-cultural elements of empathy had been given insufficient attention in my teaching across the last decade. Other educators or programs may not be dissimilar in that regard.

In 2009 I undertook a small, classroom-based inquiry, exploring second year social work students' empathic responses to four selected vignettes. Students reported the least empathy towards a narrative featuring an Aboriginal elder's story (Read 1990, p.ix; Gair 2009) the other three vignettes featured a birth mother; a police whistleblower; and a mother whose son had committed suicide. In 2011, seeking to extend my exploration of culture and empathy, I undertook a second round of classroom-based empathy research using exactly the same methodology, research question, aims and method (but with a different set of four vignettes; details below). Again, second year social work and welfare students were the sample. One vignette featured an inter-country adoption narrative. Young (2009) reported that limited research explores Australian public sentiment regarding inter-country adoption. However, when Kirton (1999) sought to explore if 'political correctness' influenced British social work students' empathy for inter-country adoptions, the findings prompted him to recommend much greater engagement with students on this topic. Most recently Lee, Crolley-Simic and Vonc (2013) identified that MSW students demonstrated a lack of awareness of the cultural consequences of transracial adoption.

An historical and contemporary research context

Historically, it has been reported that the term 'empathy' was coined by Titchener in 1909, incorporating the work of Lipps, to identify the reactive and projective elements of perspective taking (Wispe 1987; Duan and Hill 1996; Pederson, Crethat, and Carlson 2008). Later, Kohut (1977) became interested in exploring links between introspection (reflection) and empathy. Themes in more contemporary research include cognitive understanding and motivation to enact empathy, affective capacity for empathy, and the influence on empathy of gender and cultural differences (Duan and Hill 1996). Eisenberg (1982) and Hoffman (1982) examined in-group preferences in empathy, and noted that children, similar to adults, behaved more empathically towards others of the same race or gender. Additionally, Hoffman (cited in Duan and Hill 1996, p.264) identified that an empathiser's socialised perception of another individual's 'innocence' may influence their empathic response. More recently, De Vignemont and Singer (2006) identified that contextual appraisal may occur in a communication process that could intervene in an empathic response. With regard to recent research identifying empathic responses influenced by cultural background, Gutsell and Inzlicht (2010) focused on mirror neurons and neural networks in the brain, and confirmed earlier findings that in-group cultural preferences impacted on a person's ability to empathise across cultures.

Many authors differentiate between 'empathy' and 'sympathy' in professional helping (see for example Boulton 1997; Hojat et al. 2002; Trevithick 2005), and Eckermann, Dowd, Chong, Nixon, Gray, and Johnson (2006, p.113) reiterate the commonly held definition of empathy as 'walking a mile in another person's shoes'. However, they argue that empathy and sympathy often are closely related, and usage in most cultures overlaps (Eckermann et al. 2006). Noddings (2003), in contrast, rejected the concept of empathy as a projection of oneself into another's shoes, arguing such an image reflected a western, masculinist viewpoint. Other terms used in relation to empathy in the literature include imagination, kindness, intuition, pity, compassion, caring, and emotional intelligence (Hugman 2005; Howe 2008). A small number of authors speculate on the endangered nature of empathy due to its erosion from expanding market ideologies and dehumanizing bureaucracies

(White, Perlman, Fantome, and Kumagai 2010). In service users' own definitions of quality of care, empathy emerged as a key factor (Mercer and Reynolds 2002).

While most authors argue that empathy is an essential element of helping, helpers are cautioned that too close an identification with clients' lived experiences (over empathising) can lead to transference, burnout or compassion fatigue (Figley 2002; Hojat 2007). Carse (2005, p.169) noted that 'the achievement of empathy is not an easy feat', and that some 'perils' of empathy include increased vulnerability for clients and listeners. Nevertheless, Carse (2005) recommended a position of 'reasoned partiality', where the emotional needs of individuals seeking care consciously are centred.

Other authors are skeptical that heartfelt stories always would elicit empathy from the listener. For example Travis (2010) identifies that some narratives generate an apprehension in the listener, producing an otherness between themselves and the storyteller that can propel them into a position "… not of friend but of judge" (2010, p. 231, emphasis in original). These notions of judgments intercepting empathy, and the potential role of partiality in enabling empathy are revisited later in this article.

Methods of inquiry

To advance the findings from a 2009 classroom-based inquiry into empathy, in 2011 I repeated the small, classroom-based empathy project. Use of vignettes was the preferred method and, as with the previous inquiry, this project was underpinned by reflective, critical and phenomenological thinking (Fook 1999; Schutz 1972; Davis 2003; Gair 2009; Redmond 2010). Empathic validity, where the potential of the research includes increased empathy was pursued in this research (Dadds 2008). The research question for this project (the same as in 2009) was: how do students define and perceive of their empathic responses in the learning of empathy? The primary aims of both classroom-based, exploratory projects were: i) to explore and reflect on teaching and learning empathy through the use of vignettes, and ii) to use the findings to inform the teaching and learning of empathy. Students' definitions of empathy, and reasoning about their empathy as related to the vignettes were important points of exploration. Only students who participated in the research handed in their written work at the end of the workshops. In 2011 the sample was nineteen (n=19; N=22), second year, social welfare students who were enrolled in a core social work subject (in 2009; n=38). In our program students receive their first coverage of core skills and ethics in year two, although students do undertake a 'self in professional helping' subject in first year that helps facilitate their development of critical reflection skills.

For anonymity, no identifying information was requested from the students, who predominantly were a cohort of mature-age (over 25), non-Indigenous Australian women, with a small percentage of men, several international students, and a small number of Indigenous students. This sample profile appeared to reflect our social work student body and graduate profile. University Human Ethics approval was gained to conduct the research, which was undertaken within a scheduled class where all students engaged in the classroom learning activities, but only those students who wanted to participate in the research handed in their work. Vignettes are a common tool in social work education and research, although often

they are life-like fiction. Here, I sought to use factual vignettes as an authentic teaching tool, a methodological tool and as a tool for reflection. According to Ramsden (1992, p.50), deep learning requires that students try to understand and engage in a reflective, internal process that will model and reflect 'their work as professionals'.

Beginning the workshop, students were asked to write a definition of empathy. This task was followed by a lecture presentation about empathy. The presentation covered definitions, research findings, critiques and theories from multidisciplinary literature on the topic of empathy. As with the 2009 inquiry, in 2011 the students were given four (4) real life vignettes and asked to read them and reflect on whether they felt empathy (Yes or No) for characters in the vignettes, and what was their meaning making of their own responses. In 2011 those vignettes featured narratives from: i) a Chinese inter-country adoptee describing her grief, felt rejection, and grievances about her adoptive parents (Harris 2006, p.272-3; Gair 2011), ii) a victim of domestic violence; iii) a perpetrator of domestic violence; and iv) a father grieving his stillborn son. Only students willing to participate in the research submitted their written work (n = 19). Students' 'yes' and 'no' answers were tallied and a thematic analysis was undertaken on the students' written responses to identify similarities across the data, for example where students' responses clustered around a similar sentiment, or reflected themes in the literature. Vignette one (inter-country adoption) attracted the least empathy from students (Gair 2011).

Reflecting on the findings across the two projects, further pondering seemed worthwhile regarding the influence of diversity and difference, given that the two vignettes that attracted the least empathy from students in their responses were the vignettes that explicitly featured cultural contexts. As identified earlier, when Kirton (1999) explored whether 'political correctness' influenced social work students' support of inter-country adoptions, he recommended more engagement with students on this topic, while Lee, et al (2013) identified that MSW students demonstrated a lack of awareness on the consequences of transracial adoption. Equally, Pedersen and Barlow (2008) identified that prejudice and racism appeared to influence students' empathy, and Gutsell and Inzlicht (2010) confirmed earlier research that in-group cultural preferences impacted on a person's ability to empathise across cultures.

Below a selection of students' definitions are presented from both studies to demonstrate definitional similarities. Responses from 2009 specific to the Indigenous narrative, and responses from 2011 specific to the cross-cultural vignette are identified. Finally, my reflections across the 2009 and 2011 data, specific to the nominated vignettes, inform a discussion to illuminate and ponder if 'judgment' might influence empathy, and how it might be addressed in social work education.

FINDINGS: CONCEPTUALISING AND DEFINING EMPATHY

The quotes below exemplify common definitions written by the students participating in the research:

From 2009:

People being able to understand, share and being able to put themselves in that person's shoes'. This sharing and understanding will help, and provide the person …with the emotion and the feeling that this person is helping them.

It's about being able to put yourself in someone else's shoes, it means taking an active part, to have a sense of what someone else is thinking, feeling and experiencing

From 2011:

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

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

In the literature and in common parlance, empathy is often portrayed as 'walking a mile in another person's shoes' (Boulton 1987; Eckermann et a.l 2006). In both the 2009 and 2011 projects, a majority of students made reference to this familiar adage in their answers or they expressed very similar sentiments.

EMPATHIC RESPONSES (2009 DATA)

Below, a range of quotes exemplify students' empathy responses for the Aboriginal elder vignette from 2009, with evidence of 'common wound' empathy, through to partial or limited empathy:

I can understand the situation being Indigenous myself. Although I too sense a hopelessness in this piece, which I felt sadness for, however I myself feel hope.

I can feel empathy in the sense that what happened to him is awful however I believe that dwelling on the past is not the answer

No, I understand that there is cultural awareness in the sense of cultural empathy. However I don't belong to that culture, how can I then put myself in their shoes, showing I understand would be difficult…I'm classed as one of those white westerners and I have never belonged to a culture that lost their culture

I personally have not experienced feeling the way Charles Perkins feels about Australia Day so I won't be able to empathise with him

(Gair 2009)

As noted in the literature, empathy is considered as a vital skill for social work. Reflecting on students' responses above, some compassionate empathy seems apparent, while having

a common experience (or not) appeared to be a consideration for some students, and contextual appraisal using socialized perceptions also may be evident.

EMPATHIC RESPONSES - (2011 DATA)

The 2011 students' 'yes' and 'no' responses were tallied and themes were identified. The vignette that attracted the least empathy was the cross-cultural adoption scenario (Gair 2011). Some responses indicate empathy from the adoptee's perspective, while other responses suggest limited knowledge or empathy for the consequences of cross-cultural adoption. Disbelief, diagnosis and judgment appear evident in several responses. Although some empathy towards the adoptive parents was evident, the narrative was written from the perspective of the adoptee. Again, elements of 'common wound' empathy may be apparent:

As a parent I know that raising children is a hard job and can only try to imagine the difficulties associated with raising a child who comes from a different cultural background. I think it is easy to … condemn the parents but it really is impossible to say what I would do in that situation. At the same time some of their behaviour is inexcusable.

Yes- I understand that there would be a number of possibilities - the parents thought they could provide the child with better opportunities (than) in their own country… the parents were acting in the best interests of the child.

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

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.

FURTHER PONDERING AND REFLECTION

Reflecting on the 2009 and 2011 classroom-based findings, it occurred to me that students demonstrated that they could respond to a task requiring them to write a definition of empathy reminiscent of the literature. However, some students then appear to disconnect from the deep engagement reflected in their definitions, as they appraised the Aboriginal elder, or the inter-country adoption vignette. Here are several examples of this 'disconnect'. First, this student's definition from the 2009 study:

People being able to understand, share and being able to put themselves in that person's shoes'. This sharing and understanding will help, and provide the person …with the emotion and the feeling that this person is helping them.

That definition was immediately followed by a 'no' response from the same student to the Aboriginal elder vignette, with this explanation as noted earlier:

No, … I don't belong to that culture, how can I … put myself in their shoes, … would be

difficult…I'm classed as one of those white westerners and I have never belonged to a culture that lost their culture.

Here is an example from the 2011 study, in relation to the cross-cultural vignette. First this 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.

- followed by this 'no' response, as noted earlier, which does not appear to offer empathy for the adoptive parents or the adoptee:

I do not hold a lot of empathy for the adoptive parents … They have not been supportive … for a child who clearly has mental health issues and cultural issues.

There were other examples across all vignettes in both sets of data where some students provided a familiar definition of empathy followed by a response that appeared to demonstrate less empathy. Almost all definitions similarly identified features of empathy reflective of the literature. Yet the disparity or empathy gap seemed most obvious in the two vignettes that attracted the lowest empathy tallies and responses; those featuring explicit cultural contexts. Admittedly, there may be other explanations, for example students responses may have been underpinned by perceptions of 'politically correct' or desirable answers (I cannot understand because I have not experienced it). At the very least these findings suggest increased engagement with students around empathy in cross-cultural contexts may be desirable.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING EMPATHY

As noted in the opening quote, De Vignemont and Singer (2006) identify that contextual appraisal may occur in a communication process that can intervene in an empathic response, while other researchers have confirmed in-group empathy preferences (Gutsell and Inzlicht 2010). An element that is apparent in the combined findings as described above is that many students were competent at defining empathy. However, after defining empathy some students may have appraised the situation in line with their own personal values. In turn, this appraisal might have hindered their ability to be empathic and 'in the moment' in a conscious, mindful way with the presented story from the perspective of the other person (Wong 2004; De Vignemont and Singer 2006), leading to a discrepancy between their definition of empathy and their feeling and expression of empathy.

Trotter (1998, as cited in Stitts and Gibbs 2007, p. 21) spoke of a deserving/ undeserving discourse inhibiting empathy. Similarly, Hoffman explored the notion of perceived 'innocence' influencing an empathic response (cited in Duan and Hill, 1996, p.264). Some students' responses above appear to include a judgement about deservedness and innocence. For example, these responses: 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 …, and … I wouldn't feel empathy if I didn't believe it. These findings may support the notion that, rather than a spontaneous empathic emotional response, an appraisal might occur

that influences students' enactment of empathy (De Vignemont and Singer 2006). This may be particularly so in cross-cultural contexts, as argued recently by Meeuwesen (2006), who found that a patient from the same cultural background as their doctor received more empathy than ethnic-minority patients.

It is acknowledged that such a speculation, as made by Meeuwesen, cannot confidently be asserted here from these small, classroom-based studies, and more research is necessary. Further, it is acknowledged that participants in these projects were second year students, and by fourth year these students may possess better mastery over feeling and demonstrating empathy. However, available literature strongly suggests students' empathy decreases rather than increases during their university education (Hojat et al. 2002; Hojat 2007), or at best, empathy levels are maintained but do not increase significantly by the time students graduate (Quince, Parker, Wood and Benson 2011).

In further considering judgment, past writers such as Geldard (1989) have echoed Rogers' (1956/1992) position that only by being 'non-judgmental' can a counsellor see the world as the clients sees it. However, more recently Pelling, Bowers and Armstrong (2006, p.72) have challenged any uncritical acceptance of the notion of 'being non-judgmental' as identified in counseling texts. They argue that it is 'self-deluding' to say counsellors do not make judgments about clients. Indeed, counsellors are required to 'make judgments about a client, their functioning and their situation', argued Pelling et al. (2006, p.72).

From a critical perspective, Taylor and White (2006, p.941), and others, agree that while it is rarely acknowledged, 'judging the moral adequacy and worthiness of service users is a key element in social work assessment'. Of significance, they make the point that the current economic rationalist focus on risks, contingency planning, and pressure for efficiencies in service delivery may propel practitioners towards making increasingly poor and premature judgments about families with whom they are working (Gibbs and Gambrill 1999; Bennett 2001; Gardner, 2006; White, Perlman, Fantome, and Kumagai 2010). Taylor and White (2006, p.937), and others, call for a position of 'postponing judgment' (Hart 2000, p. 72), maintaining 'respectful uncertainty', and keeping an open mind to 'contra-indications' (Taylor and White 2006, p. 939) to inform 'wise judgments' (p.948) that transcend stereotyping (Gibbs and Gambrill 1999; Hart 2000). Taylor and White (2006) also argued that making judgments about another person's relationships and character often relies on 'culturally-shared common sense' (p.940).

Useful to consider here, Carse (2005, p.170) described a conscious listening process where the listener hears and accepts the person's story as valid and of equal worth to their own, before decentering their own perspective to listen to these lived circumstances and feelings with a reasoned 'partiality' not unlike that reserved for family and friends, but not without critical thought. Carse (2005) argued that reasoned 'partiality' constitutive of wise and judicious judgment' (p.171) can inform appropriate responsiveness to people in need. Similarly McDonald (2001, p.29) spoke of her use of 'conscious partiality' in her years of 'work, study and reflection on women, violence, law and learning and the many intersections'. As noted earlier, the acquisition of the skill of empathy is to enable students

and graduates to understand and tune into the experiences of others in a conscious, mindful way (Wong 2004).

Reflecting on these combined findings across 2009 and 2011 it could be the case that some narratives would not receive an empathic response if the listener hears the story through their own socialized values and cultural perspectives, and in turn these perspectives devalue some cultural groups and/or favour their own. Proactive engagement with students at multiple learning levels may help develop students' understanding and insight into their own socialized judgments and help them feel and demonstrate empathy. These multiple levels would include affective (feeling another's experiences), imaginal (imagining the experience), definitional (defining empathy), cognitive (conceptualizing) and practical levels (communication skills including active listening with partiality) (Heron 1992; Carse 2005; Gerdes, Segal, Jackson and Mullins 2011). Facilitating students' empathy skills may require parallel, explicit debate on judgment, non-judgment and wise judgment (Taylor and White 2006; Scanlon 2008), and raising awareness of cultural in-group preferences. This may be particularly important for non-Indigenous Australians working respectfully with Aboriginal Australians, and for all practitioners working across cultural contexts.

An acknowledged limitation of the method of written vignettes is that they may promote a cognitive response rather than an affective one, although the use of vignettes and scenarios is a very acceptable, common teaching tool in social work education. Future research using visual media may better facilitate students' affective responses to empathy, while use of an empathy index could improve confidence in the data.

Recommended here is increased academic attention to the cultivation of empathy, particularly as it relates to working with diversity and difference. Use of real-life narratives featuring cross-cultural contexts, with a focus on judgements and an exploration of conscious 'partiality,' may help increase students' empathy for working across cultural differences.

CONCLUSION

Pondering findings across classroom-based research in 2009 and 2011 has facilitated my critical reflection that more comprehensive exploration of what might intercept or enable and enhance empathy for working across cultures is needed. In particular, educators might advance students' learning beyond a cognitive understanding of empathy towards a deeper, felt, empathy by helping them identify their cultural appraisals and value judgements, and encouraging them to listen with 'conscious partiality'. Future research focussed on the role of judgment in the enactment of empathy and the potential role of partiality in enabling empathy is recommended.

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