

Social Work Students' Perceptions of Themselves and Others: Self-Esteem, Empathy, and Forgiveness

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ABSTRACT. This study examined how 86 social work students attending a university in Florida viewed themselves and others in relation to self-esteem, empathy, and forgiveness. The study used a cross-sectional, self-administered survey. Results indicated female students reported a higher level of emotional empathy than that reported by male students. Significant relationships were also noted between forgiveness of others and the age of the respondent and ethnicity. Self-esteem was a significant predictor of forgiveness of self and forgiveness of others; and empathy is a significant predictor of forgiveness of others. The study identified the need for social work educators to help students develop a strong sense of self and an understanding of others. Future research is suggested to explore how the timing of a transgression affects forgiveness of self and others.

KEYWORDS. Self-esteem, forgiveness of others, forgiveness of self, empathy

Social work requires professionals with a particular skill set (DuBois & Krogsrud Miley, 2011). For example, the practitioners' skill to forgive others can help clients learn to empathize with individuals who have offended them directly and indirectly. The client learns the ability to take another's perspective (empathy) during the rapport-building stage of the helping process. The practitioner models this skill by listening to the client's version of an offense. Using empathic perspective taking, the practitioner can help the client separate the offense from the offender to

be able to let go of a nonadaptive coping strategy (Gerdes, 2011). Social work practitioners also need to be able to empathize with vulnerable and at-risk clients. These clients may differ from the practitioner in terms of age, gender, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, religion, etc. Preparing students to become social work practitioners begins in the classroom. Throughout their education, students learn the philosophy, values, code of ethics, and tenets of professional social work (DuBois & Krogsrud Miley, 2011). While each course lays the foundation for all future social

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work courses and practice activities, students begin to participate in self-exploration. This study examined how 86 social work students attending a university located in Florida viewed themselves and others in relation to self-esteem, empathy, and forgiveness. These students were in their final semester of study toward a bachelor's of social work degree; therefore, they had been exposed to the tenets of professional social work.

Self-Esteem

Self-esteem is an important attribute of all of our social interactions (Pyszczynski, Greenberg, Solomon, Arndt, & Schimel, 2004). According to Pyszczynski and colleagues, "People are keenly motivated to maintain high levels of self-esteem" (p. 435). These authors also stated, "This motive underlies a great deal of human behavior" (p. 435). The students in this study need a positive global evaluation of themselves to fully participate in self-exploration activities during their educational preparation. This positive evaluation of the self, global self-esteem, aids in the exploration of self and others. Global self-esteem is a measure of global evaluation of the self. Global self-esteem consists of two components—feeling lovable and competent (Swann, 1996). Similar to other studies (Rosenberg, 1965, 1989; Swann, 1996), this study will use the term self-esteem instead of the term global self-esteem.

An individual who views their self as lovable and competent would be expected to exhibit self-confidence and self-respect (Puskar et al., 2010). According to Puskar et al., "High self-esteem has been shown to be associated with better mental health outcomes, better coping ability, and a lower incidence of depression in both adolescents and adults" (pp. 190–191). This study (Puskar et al., 2010), which focused on 193 high school students in a rural area, found positive connections between: 1) optimism and self-esteem, and 2) mental health and self-esteem.

One meta-analysis study (Cai, Wu, & Brown, 2009) found that "low self-esteem in China is associated with three indicators of psychological distress: depression, anxiety, and low subjective well-being" (p. 104). The psychological distress

experienced by individuals with low self-esteem may lead them to also have a lower opinion of others and thereby be less likely to forgive others for major and minor infractions. Additionally, these individuals may also be unable to emotionally empathize with others (Cai et al., 2009).

Karpowicz, Skärsäter, and Nevonen (2009) studied the self-esteem and psychological well-being of young Swedish females who were obtaining inpatient treatment for anorexia nervosa. The purpose of the research was to examine changes in the anorexia nervosa participants' self-esteem scores as they engaged in treatment. The result showed that an increase in self-esteem was an important part of recovery for the participants in this study. Also reported was a direct relationship between an increase in the participants' self-esteem and their emotional well-being. The research suggested low self-esteem plays an important role in manifesting and maintaining psychological dysfunction. Therefore, it is understandable that individuals who are struggling to overcome their own views of inadequacy would have a hard time forgiving and empathizing with others.

As seen in the above literature, self-esteem plays a vital role in maintaining psychological well-being and in interacting with others. Additionally for practitioners, high self-esteem can increase their resiliency when confronted with hostile, depressed, and negative clients. Therefore, it is important for social work education to pay particular attention to future practitioners' self-esteem as they matriculate through the educational process.

Empathy

The word empathy can be defined in a variety of ways. According to Hoffman (1981), empathy involves both a cognitive and an emotional component (as cited in Myyry & Helkama, 2001). Through the cognitive component of empathy, the person is able to take the perspective of another person (Smith, 2006, 2009). Through the second component, emotional empathy, the individual feels as if they are sharing in the emotional experience of the other person (Clements, Brannen, Kirkley, Gordon, & Church, 2006; Myyry & Helkama, 2001; Smith, 2006).

Myyry and Helkama's (2001) study reported that the women they surveyed had significantly higher empathy scores compared with the men in their study. The participants in the study were college students from three different Finland universities. The study by Clements et al. (2006), which used both college students and community residents as a study sample, also revealed that forgiveness of others was related to age and gender. These authors stated that older and female participants were more likely to forgive others.

Several authors have made a theoretical and empirical connection between forgiveness and empathy (Enright & The Human Development Study Group, 1991; Konstam, Chernoff, & Deveney, 2001; Macaskill, Maltby, & Day, 2002). For example, the study conducted by Macaskill et al. found that the women did score higher than the men did on emotional empathy, and emotional empathy is positively correlated with forgiveness of others but not with forgiveness of self.

Forgiveness

Similar to empathy, there are a number of ways to define forgiveness. For example, Konstam et al. (2001) defined forgiveness as a willingness to abandon one's right to resentment, negative judgment, and indifferent behavior. According to Worthington (2001), forgiveness is defined as the emotional replacement of unforgiving emotions by positive other-oriented emotions, such as empathy, compassion, sympathy, and love. Forgiveness has also been described as a deliberate attempt to overcome unhappy feelings and thoughts to facilitate individual happiness, which usually requires the individual's perception of the wrong-doer to change, from adopting a negative view to adopting a more sympathetic view.

Hodgson and Wertheim (2007) stated that forgiveness of self and others "is considered important in the successful maintenance of relationship[s]" (p. 931) with significant others. This study showed that to maintain their relationship, participants had to be willing to abandon resentment toward themselves and others, had to resolve their negative judgments toward

the self and others who were possibly involved, and had to refrain from acting out any indifferent behavior toward the self and/or others. Forgiveness was facilitated when the participants attended to their emotions and worked to repair their relationships (Hodgson & Wertheim, 2007). A study by Harris (2007) examined the relationship between the participants' likelihood to forgive self and others. The study reported that the participants' view of the transgression impacted the outcome of forgiveness of self and others.

To effectively assess their clients, social work practitioners must be able to focus on the client's needs and situation. Social work practitioners who possess a positive image of themselves (high self-esteem) are less likely to personalize client resistance and/or the client's inability to fully participate in the helping process. Additionally, as their clients may be overwhelmed with self-blame, practitioners who are able to forgive self and others for transgressions are expected to be better able to help clients resolve feelings related to the source for the self-blaming. These practitioners must also be able to cognitively and emotionally empathize with their clients. Consequently, there is a need for literature that examines social work students' self-esteem, ability to empathize with clients, and forgiveness of self and others.

Accordingly, the main purpose of the study is to examine the direct effect of self-esteem and empathy on forgiveness of self and forgiveness of others among social work students.

The following research hypotheses were tested:

- H1: The greater the self-esteem of an individual, the higher that individual's forgiveness of self.
- H2: The greater the empathy of an individual, the higher that individual's forgiveness for self.
- H3: The greater the self-esteem of an individual, the higher that individual's self-forgiveness for others.
- H4: The greater the empathy of an individual, the higher that individual's forgiveness for others.

METHODS

Sampling

The study used a convenience sampling method. A total of 112 social work students from the state of Florida participated in the study. Given the nature of absolute voluntary participation without compensation, 26 participants did not complete the survey. Therefore, 86 participants were included for the analysis. The age range of the participants was from 19 to 51 years ($M = 27.90$ years, $SD = 8.54$). The largest group of participants by gender were female ($N = 71$, 83%). Of the remaining participants, 8 (9%) were male and 7 (8%) did not identify their gender. Of the 86 participants, 9 (11%) were Black, 3 (4%) were Asian American, 58 (67%) were White, 14 (14%) were Latino, and 2 (2%) participants identified their ethnic group as Other. Participants were also asked their sexual orientation. Seventy-four (86%) of the participants were heterosexual, 1 (1%) was homosexual, and 2 (2%) were bisexual. Nine (11%) of the 86 participants did not identify their sexual orientation (See Table 1).

Measures

The instrument utilized included 73 items and 4 demographic items. Even though all instruments were chosen from already psychometri-

cally proven scales, as necessary, the authors modified and revised existing questions to accommodate the current research settings.

Self-esteem was measured using Rosenberg's 10-item Global Self-Esteem Inventory (Rosenberg, 1989). The scale's Cronbach's alpha for various studies has been high, ranging from .77 to .89 (Blascovich & Tomaka, 1993; Rosenberg, 1965). An example item is, "I take a positive attitude toward myself." To obtain participants' scores, the 5 negatively-worded items were reverse coded and all items were summed for a total.

Emotional empathy (empathy) was measured using the Mehrabian and Epstein Empathy Questionnaire (MEEQ; Mehrabian & Epstein, 1972). An example of an MEEQ item is, "I get very angry when I see someone being ill treated." Participants responded to each item using 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Mehrabian and Epstein reported a split-half reliability coefficient of .84. Eighteen of the total 33 items were reverse coded. To obtain a total for this instrument, the 18 reverse-coded items were recoded, and then all of the 33 items were summed for a total score. Instrument scores ranged from 33 to 165. Higher scores are indicative of higher levels of empathy.

Forgiveness of self was measured using a 15-item Forgiveness of Self scale (FOS), which is a subscale of the Mauger Forgiveness Scale (Mauger et al., 1992). It is defined as the extent to which an individual is able to let go of feelings of self-condemnation when they have transgressed against the self. Mauger et al. reported a coefficient alpha of .82 for the FOS. An example of an FOS item is, "A lot of times I have feelings of guilt or regret for the things that I have done."

Forgiveness of others was measured using the second subscale of the Mauger Forgiveness Scale (Mauger et al., 1992), the Forgiveness of Others scale (FOO), which also has 15 items. It is defined as the extent to which an individual restrains from negative responses such as taking revenge toward the individual who offended them. Mauger et al. reported a coefficient alpha of .79 for the FOO. An example of an FOO item is, "I have grudges which I have held on to for months or years."

TABLE 1. Demographic Characteristics of Surveyed Social Work Students

Characteristics	Social Work Students ($N = 86$)	
	% or Mean	SD
Gender		
Male	10.1	
Female	89.9	
Ethnicity		
Black	10.5	
Asian American	3.5	
White	67.4	
Latino	16.3	
Other	2.3	
Sexual Orientation		
Heterosexual	96.1	
Homosexual	1.3	
Bisexual	2.6	
Age	27.9	8.5

For each Forgiveness subscale, participants responded to each item using a "T" for true and "F" for false. Participants received 1 point when their response *did not match* the response Mauger et al. (1992) provided. Participants' responses that *matched* the response provided by Mauger et al. received 0 points. For each scale's total score, all items were summed and each scale score ranged from 0 to 15. Lower scores represented higher levels of forgiveness.

As demographic variables, 1) gender, 2) ethnicity, 3) age, and 4) sexual orientation were included to understand the representative characteristics of the participants (See Table 2).

Data Collection and Procedures

After the authors obtained internal review board approval, they sent an e-mail message to all instructors to get permission to conduct a survey in the classes. The classes that were taught by someone other than the researchers were selected for data collection.

Data collection consisted of informing the potential participants about the purpose of the study and giving them an informed consent form to read. The study was voluntary and anonymous. Therefore, individuals who chose to participate were given a research packet to complete. Individuals who chose not to participate were asked to read from their textbook while their classmates completed the research packets. There was no compensation provided for participation. Completed research packets were placed in a box as the participants left the classroom and then were maintained in a locked file cabinet accessible only to the first author. After the data had been entered and checked for accuracy, the research packets were destroyed.

Data Analysis Methods

Five different quantitative data analyses were performed using the Statistical Package for the Social Science version 17.0. First, descriptive statistics were used to explore the sample characteristics and distribution of the variables.

TABLE 2. Dependent and Independent Variable and Cronbach's Alpha

Variable	Definition & Examples	Name	Number of items	Cronbach's alpha
<i>Self-Esteem</i>	Individual's self-evaluation about the thought and feelings related to him/herself as an object. Example: I feel that I am a person of worth, at least on an equal basis with others. I certainly feel useless at times.	Rosenberg (1965)	10	.91
<i>Empathy</i>	The extent to which an individual feels "a vicarious emotional response to perceived emotional experience of others." Example: I become more irritated than sympathetic when I see someone's tears. I get very angry when I see someone being ill treated.	Mehrabian & Epstein (1972)	33	.72
<i>Forgiveness of Self</i>	The extent to which an individual is able to let go of feelings of self-condemnation when they have transgressed against the self. Example: I often feel that no matter what I do now, I will never make up for the mistakes I have made in the past.	Mauger et al. (1992)	15	.75
<i>Forgiveness of Others</i>	The extent to which an individual restrains negative response such as taking revenge toward the individual who offended. Example: When other people insult me, I tell them off. It is hard for me to forgive those who hurt me.	Mauger et al. (1992)	15	.70

Second, a Pearson correlation coefficient was calculated for the relationship among all scale variables. Third, an independent-samples *t*-test was performed to compare mean differences of the four study variables between male and female students. Fourth, analysis of variance (ANOVA) was performed to assess ethnic differences in the four study variables. Finally, stepwise multiple regression was conducted to determine which independent variables were the predictors of forgiveness of self and forgiveness of others. Prior to the regression analyses, data were first transformed to eliminate outliers, and potential violations of the usual regression assumptions including normality, linearity, reliability, and homoscedasticity were examined.

RESULTS

Scale Reliabilities

The reliability of all scales was reasonable with a Cronbach's alpha of equal to or greater than .70. The standardized alpha was .91 for the Self-Esteem, .72 for the Empathy, .70 for the Forgiveness of Others, and .75 for the Forgiveness of Self.

Before testing the main hypotheses, bivariate analyses were conducted to understand the relationships among demographic variables and the four study variables.

Descriptive and Bivariate Statistics Analyses for Independent and Dependent Variables

Descriptive statistics were obtained for each of the variables. For the Self-Esteem scale, participants' self-esteem scores ranged from 20 to 50 while the possible range was from 10 (lowest level of self-esteem) to 50 (highest level of self-esteem). Summary statistics for Self-Esteem showed that the mean score was 42.71 ($SD = 6.72$, $N = 86$). For the Emotional Empathy scale, the possible range of scores was from 33 (lowest level of empathy) to 165 (highest level of empathy) while the obtained scores ranged from 85 to 148. The mean score of the Emotional Empathy was 118.29 ($SD = 13.20$, $N = 86$). The range of possible scores for the

TABLE 3. Mean and Standard Deviation of the Independent and Dependent Variables

Scale	Mean	SD	Possible Range
Self-Esteem	42.71	6.72	10–50
Empathy	118.29	13.20	33–165
Forgiveness of Self	4.76	3.21	0–15
Forgiveness of Others	3.34	2.59	0–15

FOO and FOS was 0 to 15; both the FOO and the FOS obtained scores that ranged from 0 to 12. On a scale from 1 (*highest level of forgiveness*) to 15 (*lowest level of forgiveness*), the social work students who participated in the study reported a high level on the FOO ($M = 3.34$, $SD = 2.59$, $N = 85$). On the other hand, the mean score of the FOS was 4.76 ($SD = 3.21$, $N = 85$).

The mean, standard deviation, and the possible range of all variables are presented in Table 3.

Correlation Coefficients, Independent Samples T-Test, and ANOVA

The correlations among all scale variables (i.e., age, self-esteem, empathy, FOO, FOS) are presented in the correlation matrix (Table 4). Four out of 10 bivariate relationships were significant.

1. A significant correlation between age and forgiveness of self was found
 - a. ($r(80) = -.269$, $p < .05$), indicating that older participants tend to have a higher level of forgiveness of self.

TABLE 4. Correlation Matrix

	1	2	3	4	5
1. Age	1.00				
2. Self-Esteem	.13	1.00			
3. Empathy	-.05	-.01	1.00		
4. Forgiveness of Others	-.34**	-.25*	.12	1.00	
5. Forgiveness of Self	-.27*	-.62**	.19	.18	1.00

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

2. A significant correlation between age and forgiveness of others was found
 - a. ($r(80) = -.342, p < .01$), indicating that older participants tend to have a higher level of forgiveness of others.
3. A moderately strong correlation between self-esteem and forgiveness of self was found ($r(80) = -.621, p < .01$), indicating that participants with a higher level of self-esteem tend to have a higher level of forgiveness of self.
4. A significant correlation between self-esteem and forgiveness of others was found ($r(80) = -.252, p < .05$), indicating that participants with a higher level of self-esteem tend to have a higher level of forgiveness of others.

A *t*-test was conducted to find gender differences for the four study variables. The *t*-test found one significant gender difference, empathy. Female students had a higher level of empathy ($M = 119.93, SD = 12.80$) compared with male students ($M = 108.25, SD = 14.87$). The difference between the two means is statistically significant at the .05 level ($t = 2.409, df = 77$).

A one-way ANOVA was conducted to investigate participants' ethnic differences in the four study variables. The ANOVA result showed that significant ethnic differences were found in forgiveness of others. The result of the post-hoc comparisons indicated that those participants who were Black ($M = 1.89, SD = 1.76$), White ($M = 3.21, SD = 2.58$), and Latino ($M = 3.79$,

$SD = 1.48$) had higher levels of forgiveness of others compared with those who identified as Other ($M = 9.50, SD = 3.54$), $F(4, 80) = 4.313, p < .05$.

Hypotheses Testing: Multivariate Analyses

After controlling the covariates (i.e., gender, ethnicity, age, and sexual orientation), each hypothesis (H1 through H4) was individually tested through stepwise multiple regression (See Table 5).

H1: The Greater the Self-Esteem of an Individual, the Higher That Individual's Forgiveness of Self

The current study supported H1. After controlling for the covariates, self-esteem significantly predicted forgiveness of self. A significant regression equation was found, $F(7, 60) = 9.156, p < .001$, with R^2 of .425, $\Delta R^2 = .37$.

H2: The Greater the Empathy of an Individual, the Higher That Individual's Forgiveness of Self

The hypothesis testing rejected H2. The testing did not significantly explain the variance of forgiveness of self. In other words, emotional empathy is not a significant predictor of forgiveness of self.

H3: The Greater the Self-Esteem of an Individual, the Higher That Individual's Self-Forgiveness of Others

The current study supported H3. After controlling for the covariates, self-esteem significantly predicted forgiveness of others. A significant regression equation was found, $F(5, 62) = 4.566, p < .01$, with R^2 of .269, $\Delta R^2 = .07$.

H4: The Greater the Empathy of an Individual, the Higher That Individual's Forgiveness of Others

The current study supported H4. Empathy significantly accounted for some portion of the variance of forgiveness of others. A significant regression equation was found, $F(5, 62) = 4.528, p < .01$, with R^2 of .267, $\Delta R^2 = .06$.

TABLE 5. Regression of Self-Esteem and Empathy on Forgiveness of Self and Forgiveness of Others

	Forgiveness of Self				
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	β	R^2	ΔR^2
Self-Esteem	-.29	.05	-.63***	.43	.37
Empathy	.04	.03	.16	.08	.03
	Forgiveness of Others				
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	β	R^2	ΔR^2
Self-Esteem	-.11	.05	-.26**	.27	.07
Empathy	-.06	.02	-.26**	.27	.06

** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

DISCUSSION

As would be expected, this study found a significant relationship between forgiveness of others and age. This finding is similar to findings reported by Clements et al. (2006). In both studies, older participants scored higher in forgiveness of others compared with younger participants. This result may be due to older people having lived through and resolved previous transgressions, and therefore, older people may be less likely to harbor ill feelings toward the self and others. These older participants may have learned to consider all aspects of an incident before negatively judging themselves and others. Being able to process an incident before deciding on an action is strength that helps build and fortify relationships.

The result of the *t*-test found a significant gender difference on empathy. The empathy scores for the female participants were higher than the scores for the male participants. Similarly, the study by Macaskill et al. (2002) also found that the females in their study reported higher levels of empathy than those reported by the males in their study. However, according to Myyry and Helkama (2001), empathy is not a gendered trait. They further concluded that it is more socially acceptable for women to show empathy than it is for men to freely show this trait. Based on the results of this current study and the previous studies, it is apparent that this discussion is inconclusive.

The ANOVA test found ethnic differences for forgiveness of others. The post-hoc test revealed that Black, White, and Latino participants have a higher level of forgiveness of others than that of participants who identified themselves as "Other." It is hard to discuss the implication of this finding due to a lack of past studies that focused on the relationship between ethnicity and forgiveness of others. Additionally, the category of "Other" was not specified in the study. Therefore, there is no way to determine why participants may have selected "Other" as their ethnic category. For example, participants who chose this category 1) may have been of mixed races, 2) may have been individuals who feel unable to categorize their ethnicity, and 3) may have been individuals who refused to select one

of the provided categories for personal reasons, etc.

Three of the four study hypotheses were supported. The test results of H1 revealed that self-esteem predicts forgiveness of self. In this study, the participants who felt good about themselves (high self-esteem) were also able to forgive themselves. Our findings are consistent with the Terror Management Theory of Self-Esteem (Greenberg, Porteus, Simon, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1995). Self-esteem has been described as a protective shield (Pyszczynski et al., 2004). This shield protects the individual from assaults aimed at hurting the individual emotionally. This shield also assists the individual in resolving transgressions against the self.

H2 was not supported. For the participants in this study, empathy was not a significant predictor of forgiveness of self. According to Macaskill et al. (2002), individuals who have a high level of empathy usually have a high level of forgiveness of others but not a high level of forgiveness of self. This discrepancy may lie in the individual holding him/herself to a higher standard when considering acceptable and unacceptable behavior. Additionally, society encourages emotional connections and the forgiveness of others. Fisher and Exline (2006) refer to empathy and forgiveness of others as prosocial behaviors, while self-forgiveness is not a prosocial behavior.

Another possibility for the results of H2 is that forgiveness of self requires a restorative perspective (Ross, Hertenstein, & Wrobel, 2007). This restorative perspective allows the participant to reflect on the impact of the transgressions of others as well as self-transgressions on their view of themselves. The endpoint of this reflection is an integrated view that includes the transgression as a learning experience. Through this process, the participant restores their self-view without demeaning the self. Hence, forgiveness of self requires the participant to be self-focused, while empathizing with others requires the participant to be other focused (Ross et al., 2007).

The test results of H3 revealed that self-esteem predicts forgiveness of others. The participants with high self-esteem may be better able to forgive others for a transgression upon them because they were able to process the transgression and resolve the interaction within themselves. It

seems self-esteem may be an anxiety buffer for the participants in this study (Pyszczynski et al., 2004). In support of this assumption, according to Hodgson and Wertheim (2007), individuals with greater "emotion-management skills have been shown to be more adaptable to stressors such as transgressions and more able to resolve interpersonal problems" (p. 933).

Research conducted by Marshall, Marshall, Serran, and O'Brien (2009) supports this result. They reported that "self-esteem strongly determines self-serving biases which influence the way people perceive their own and other people's behaviors" (p. 218). For example, participants who ranked their self-esteem as high are expected to view a transgression differently than would participants who ranked their self-esteems as low. Unlike the participants with high self-esteem, the participants with low self-esteem are expected to harbor negative feelings about the other regardless of the severity of the transgression (Marshall et al., 2009).

H4 was also supported. That is, empathy accounted for a significant amount of the variance in forgiveness of others. The participants in this study were able to forgive others for their transgressions as they were able to take the perspective of others. Perspective taking behaviors support empathic responses while also reinforcing the individuals' positive view of him/herself (Macaskill et al., 2002). It is possible that the helping relationships formed by these participants may not suffer from distrust, as these participants may have a realistic perspective of the client population that grounds their expectations.

Research conducted by Clements et al. (2006) supports the outcome of this test. These authors reported that the participants in their study who scored high on empathy were able to separate the offense from the offenders. This separation afforded the participants an opportunity to view the offense and the offender as separate entities. Consequently, the participant was able to forgive the person for the transgression while not forgiving the transgression.

LIMITATIONS

Due to the research design, cross-sectional design and convenience sampling method, it is

difficult to generalize the findings. Another limitation is the ethnic category of "Other" on the demographic sheet. This item did not provide enough categories or an open space for participants to be specific as to their ethnicity. Given the sample sizes of past studies, another limitation of this study is the sample size. However, past studies have focused more on clients than on practitioners. In spite of the small sample size, this study has a great implication due to its focus on future social work practitioners.

CONCLUSION

This study explored 86 social work participants' ratings of their self-esteem, empathy, and forgiveness. Of particular importance was whether participants' self-esteem and empathy were related to forgiveness of self and others.

This study revealed that the participants who felt good about themselves also felt less hindered by feelings of self-doubt. For social work practitioners, high self-esteem could be considered an asset because of the potential negative client interactions. Study participants who felt good about themselves are expected to not internalize their client's less-than-warm responses (Fisher & Exline, 2006; Ranganathan & Todorov, 2010). Also, when their client/worker relationships are not successful, these participants would be expected to reflect upon the situation, determine their role in creating the relationship, and work to restore the relationship without feeling the need to blame, shame, or terminate the client. Because these future practitioners are secure with themselves, the participant's clients are constantly exposed to their optimism and hopefulness (Harris, 2007). As the client/worker working relationship evolves, the client's exposure to the worker's optimism and hopefulness may result in the client becoming more optimistic and hopeful. The feelings of optimism and hope may lead the client into investing in the treatment process.

The ability "to forgive oneself appears to have useful outcomes" for the individual, and it is also a useful trait for social work practitioners (Hodgson & Wertheim, 2007, p. 932). Clients experiencing a difficult time forgiving themselves for

an indiscretion may benefit from practitioners who are able to both forgive self and demonstrate compassion toward others (empathize). One would expect practitioners with high forgiveness of self to effectively respond to clients who present with shame and anger toward the self (Rangganadhan & Todorov, 2010). These practitioners can model appropriate methods of coping and releasing harmful thoughts about the self.

As low self-esteem feeds on proving worthiness, pairing difficult clients with practitioners who possess low self-esteem will surely result in failure for the client and the practitioner. According to Ingersoll-Dayton and Krause (2005), "The ability to forgive oneself represents an important, but over-looked, stepping-stone to self-acceptance and mental health" (p. 283). Practitioners who possess this ability can act as role models for their clients. As practitioners, the participants who scored high on forgiveness of others and self-esteem may be better able to work with clients who take pessimistic views of their situation. These practitioners, as they help their client with the presenting issue, become positive living scripts for the client to imitate. During the helping process, the client is able to observe, receive feedback, and enlist assistance from the practitioner. Over time, the skills the client learns may become a part of their cognitive repertoire.

The ability to separate the offense from the offender is an important attribute when working with social work clients (Clements et al., 2006). As most social work practitioners cannot select who they will work with at their place of employment, a practitioner may be assigned clients who have committed horrific human violations. Being able to work with these clients requires the social work practitioner to take the client's perspective. The ability to empathize with these clients may support the helping relationship as these participants are expected to be able to take the perspective of their clients (Hodgson & Wertheim, 2007).

Future research should be longitudinal, thereby providing an opportunity to see if the participants' ability to forgive self and others and their ability to empathize with clients changes as they matriculate through the social work program. Future research should also consider the time frame for the transgressions the participants

focus on when responding to the items of forgiveness of self and others. That is, do participants respond the same way in regards to a recent transgression and a transgression that occurred 1 year ago?

As social work education prepares students to work with vulnerable and at-risk clients, we strongly encourage social work educators to structure their classes in a way that fosters a sense of self in the students, that encourages the students to take another's perspective, and that teaches students how to resolve misunderstandings.

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