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Professional competencies in social work students: emotional intelligence, reflective ability and empathy—a comparative and longitudinal analysis

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ABSTRACT

Social work education and training seeks to develop professional competence in students in terms of knowledge, values and skills to effectively enable them to discharge the core functions of the profession, which is the alleviation of distress and enhancement of well-being. Emotional intelligence, reflective ability and empathy assume significance in this regard. This study investigated the manifestation of these competencies in women social work students in India using a longitudinal design (n = 34). An equal number of nonsocial work students were also enlisted as a reference group for comparison. Standardized instruments to assess the key variables were administered to both groups using survey methodology. Findings revealed that reflective ability scores significantly predicted the manifestation of emotional intelligence. No statistically significant change in the manifestation of the attributes studied was evidenced as students progressed from course entry to completion at the end of their social work degree. At the point of course completion, social work students had significantly higher scores than the reference group. The implications of these findings are discussed in terms of the need to focus consciously on the development and enhancement of these key attributes by providing appropriate curricular inputs to students in undergraduate social work programs.

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emotional intelligence;
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The core purpose of social work education is the development of professional competence that enables budding professionals to inculcate evidence-based knowledge, harbor person-centered values and foster skills of accurate assessment and effective intervention. Skills of reflection (Ferguson, 2018) and empathic ability (Gerdes & Segal, 2011) have been for long considered as crucial competencies in the professional repertoire of social workers, besides several other attributes. Of late, the concept of emotional intelligence has also been thrown into the mix. While these elements have been acknowledged as important for practice, there is a dearth of empirical research with regard to these dimensions within extant social work literature.

Emotional intelligence (EI) has been defined as a cognitive ability that involves the ability to perceive, use, understand and manage emotions in oneself and others (Kong,

Zhao, & You, 2012). It is about identifying emotions (in self and others), relating to others, and communicating feelings (Cherry, 2018). EI has been conceptualized either as a trait (Petrides & Furnham, 2000) or as a cognitive ability (Salovey & Mayer, 1990) and the latter notion implies that it is amenable to change and intervention. The social work literature relating to EI is however scant and there has been relatively little work published on EI and social work education (Clarke, Lovelock, & McNay, 2016). As a profession that is fundamentally interpersonal in nature, emotional content and exchange is central to relationship-based social work practice (Hennessey, 2011). The content, direction and experience of professional practice is underpinned by the emotional elements that surface and are dealt with in an interpersonal context. Establishment of positive relationships is at the heart of effective social work practice (Trevithick, 2003) and requires from workers the ability to identify their own emotional responses and those of service users (Munro, 2011). The concept of EI assumes significance in this relationship context of social work that necessitates a conscious, proactive awareness of emotions and their management (Ingram, 2013). Morrison (2007) considers EI as a key element in relation to five core social work tasks: engagement, assessment, observation, decision-making, planning and intervention. EI encompasses attributes such as self-awareness, motivation, self-control, adeptness in relationships and skills of empathy (Salovey & Mayer, 1990).

Empathy is the ability to get an insight into or recognize the emotions of others (Badea & Pana, 2010) and has been considered a key factor in all 'helping' relationships (Grant, 2014; Ioannidou & Konstantikaki, 2008). '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' (Trevithick, 2005, p. 81). It is thus essentially an 'other-centered' emotion (Batson, 1991), that involves the cognitive appraisal of the client's inner world and an appropriate response to the client's emotional experience (Stanley & Mettilda, 2016a). Empathy enables one to see external events through the eye of the client and thus provides a near accurate perception of life stressors and the subjective realities of the client's life situation (Stanley & Sethuramalingam, 2015). This is in line with the social work philosophy of being 'person-centered'. Empathy has been acknowledged within the social work literature to be a crucial professional attribute that social workers bring to their interaction with clients (Gair, 2013; Ingram, 2013; Levy, Shlomo, & Itzhaky, 2014; Stanley & Mettilda, 2016a). Positive outcomes of empathy include the development of better therapeutic relationships with clients and increased client satisfaction (Moyers & Miller, 2013). Empathy may have a strong influence on client well-being (Morrison, 2007) and by itself have a therapeutic benefit in terms of relieving distress and contributing to the development and strengthening of the therapeutic bond (Jurkovich, Pierce, Pananen, & Rivara, 2000). Empathy can also moderate the relationship between work stress caused through interaction with clients and the experience of burnout (Silter & Boyd, 2015). It thus has benefits for both actors in the social work relationship, the client and the social worker. Empathy is a multi-faceted practice skill and comprises four subjectively experienced components namely, affective response, self-other awareness, perspective taking, and emotion regulation (Gerdes, Lietz, & Segal, 2011). A meta-analysis of psychotherapeutic literature relating to empathy considers it both an ingredient of a healthy therapeutic relationship and a specific, effective response that promotes

strengthening of the self and deeper exploration on the part of the professional (Elliott, Bohart, Watson, & Murphy, 2018). While empathy has been universally acknowledged to be a core competence for effective social work practice (Shulman, 2009), actual research on empathy in social work remains scarce and sketchy (Gerdes & Segal, 2011; Greeno, Ting, & Wade, 2018; Morrison, 2007).

Reflective thinking is believed to be a key component of EI (Schön, 1983). It is a core concept in social work and acknowledged to be one of the most important elements of practice (Ferguson, 2018). Reflective practice involves self-examination that involves looking back over what has happened in practice in an effort to improve or encourage professional growth (Ruth-Sahd, 2003). Being reflective in practice refers to the cognitive process of understanding and evaluating the meaning of a current event in the light of previous experience, knowledge, beliefs and assumptions (Asselin, 2011; Bernard, Gorgas, Greenberger, Jacques, & Khandelwal, 2012). The reflective process is essentially one of self-examination and introspection through which the practitioner seeks to analyze and critique their own skills, performance, outcomes and behavior (Tsingos-Lucas, Bosnic-Anticevich, Schneider, & Smith, 2016). The practitioner shows a high degree of self-awareness, role awareness and awareness of assumptions underlying practice (Sheppard, 2007). It is an imaginative process of using 'ifs' and 'buts' to various client related actions and scenarios and requires analysis of both process and content. Schön (1991) distinguishes between 'reflection in action' and 'reflection on action' and this suggests that the reflective process is not an afterthought but needs to occur in the moment as well. Social work is a relationship based medium of enabling people to cope with various difficulties encountered in their life situations. Whether it is the process of engaging in assessment or intervention aimed at distress alleviation, relationship skills are the quintessential abilities in a social worker's professional repertoire that determines process efficacy and outcomes. Advocates of relationship-based practice observe that to fully realize its potential, practitioners need to develop their reflective capabilities to deal with the emotionally charged content generated in the context of social work relationships (Ruch, 2014). Undoubtedly then reflective abilities are required during the entire social work process and influence its nature and dynamics. Not surprising then, that acquisition of reflective skills is a core concern of social work education and training. This would potentially enable student trainees deal better with the complexities, uncertainties and challenges encountered in contemporary practice (Dolan, Peasgood, & White, 2006; Ruch, 2007; Yip, 2006) and to ensure that they are better equipped to engage in complex decision making and effective practice (Wilson, 2013). An earlier cross-sectional study done with social work students in India (Stanley & Metilda, 2016b) has elicited reflective and empathetic abilities as predicting the manifestation of EI. It also found higher mean scores in students in the final year of their degree than those in the first year. However, this study was cross-sectional in nature and compared three different cohorts of students in different years of their degree studies.

Against the background of the literature reviewed, the present study considers the manifestation of three key professional competencies considered important for social workers namely, emotional intelligence, empathy and reflective ability. It has been observed that professional education and training for a career in the 'helping' professions such as teaching, nursing, or social work combines academic and professional requirements that can induce more stress in students when compared to other academic

programs (Dziegielewski, Turnage, & Roest-Marti, 2004). We were hence interested in comparing social work students with those from a nonprofessional degree programme. Our interests also lay in trying to understand whether these attributes undergo change as social work students' progress through their degree courses. In order to explore these issues, the following research questions were framed:

- (1) What is the extent to which EI, empathy and RA are manifested in undergraduate students of social work?
- (2) How do social work students compare with nonsocial work undergraduates in terms of the extent to which these competencies are manifest?
- (3) Is there a change in the extent to which these attributes manifest themselves as social work students' progress through their degree course?
- (4) What is the nature of the relationship between these three attributes?
- (5) To what extent do empathy and RA predict the manifestation of EI in social work students?

Methods

Data collection

The study used a longitudinal non-experimental design and data were collected from two groups of undergraduate students over a three-year period. Survey methodology was deployed to collect data from thirty-four social work students in the first year of their Bachelor of Social Work degree (BSW) who comprised the study group (SG) and were administered the instruments of the study. Data were also collected simultaneously from an equal number of reference group (RG) students doing their Bachelor of Arts degree in Tamil studies (Tamil is a vernacular of south India). Data were collected from both cohorts at two points; on course entry (T1) and on the verge of course completion (T2). At T2 (end of third and final year of the degree), there were two dropouts in the study group and one in the reference group. We finally had 66 data sets for the SG respondents (T1:34+ T2:32) and 67 (T1:34+ T2:33) for the RG and this data has been used for analysis.

Measures

A socio-demographic data sheet was prepared to collect background information from the respondents. In addition, three standardized instruments were used to assess the variables of interest and are briefly described here.

The Emotional Intelligence Scale (EI Scale) by Schutte et al. (1998) measures three sub-dimensions of EI namely: appraisal and expression of emotion, regulation of emotion and utilization of emotion. The scale has 33 items, each measured on a five-point Likert scale with responses ranging from 'strongly disagree' (Score 1) to 'strongly agree' (Score 5) with higher scores indicating higher levels of EI. The Cronbach's alpha in the present study was calculated as 0.90, which indicates an 'excellent' level of scale reliability (George & Mallery, 2003).

The Groningen Reflective Ability Scale by Aukes, Geertsma, Cohen-Schotanus, Zwierstra, and Slaets (2007) has 23 items that measure three sub-dimensions of RA

namely: self-reflection, empathic reflection and reflective communication. The items are measured on five-point Likert-type scales with responses ranging from 'totally disagree' to 'totally agree'. Higher scores indicate higher RA. The Cronbach's alpha in the present study was calculated as 0.86, which indicates 'excellent' scale reliability (George & Mallery, 2003).

The Empathy Assessment Index (EAI) by Lietz et al. (2011) is a 17-item validated self-report measure developed to assess empathy. It has five sub-dimensions namely: affective response, emotional regulation, perspective taking, self-other awareness and empathic attitudes. In this study, we did not use the 'emotional regulation' sub-scale as this dimension is also assessed by the EIS. The items are scored on a six-point Likert-type scale from 'never' (Score—1) to 'always' (Score—6) with higher scores indicative of higher levels of empathy. The Cronbach's alpha in the present study was calculated as 0.86, which indicates 'excellent' scale reliability (George & Mallery, 2003).

Setting for the study

Data were collected from students at Cauvery College for Women in Tiruchirappalli, the southernmost state of Tamilnadu in India. The college is a leading Arts and Science college exclusively for women students and is affiliated to the Bharathidasan University. The undergraduate social work programme confers a BSW degree on students and is of three years' duration. The college caters to about 4000 students in fourteen undergraduate three-year degree programmes and nine two-year postgraduate courses including social work at both levels.

Ethical issues

The ethics panel of the college cleared the research proposal after permission to undertake the study was granted by the Principal of the college. Informed consent was obtained from all respondents and they were briefed about the nature of the study. It was made clear that their participation was voluntary and that they could drop out of the study at any point without stating any reason for doing so. The questionnaires were anonymized and no personal identification data were collected from the respondents nor was there any follow up contact.

Statistical analyses

SPSS version 25 (Statistical Package for Social Sciences; IBM Software, Armonk, NY) was used for data analysis and for generating the results of this study. Independent sample t tests were used to compare between group differences on the variables studied. Paired t tests were used to assess change in variables for the study group from T1 to T2. Pearson's coefficients were computed to determine the statistical correlation among variables. Linear regression analysis was used to ascertain variables that predicted the manifestation of EI. Finally, path analysis was used to diagrammatically represent the variables that predicted EI.

Results

Respondents' profile

Social work students (SG) ranged in age from 16 to 23 years with a mean of 17.88 years ($SD = 1.25$). The age of BA (Tamil) students (RG) ranged from 17 to 21 years with a mean of 18.12 years ($SD = 0.84$). The average monthly family income for SG respondents was Rs. 15,876.47 (approx. 225 USD) while that of the RG was Rs. 10,338.24 (approx. 145 USD). Student *t* tests revealed that in terms of age ($t(66) = 0.91$; $p > .05$) and family income ($t(66) = 1.26$; $p > .05$): there were no significant statistical differences between both groups.

The two respondent groups were also comparable across several domains as depicted in Table 1. Both groups hailed predominantly from Hindu nuclear families residing in urban areas. They were all women students from the same college, and this ensured further similarities in terms of key academic experiences. Further, the majority in both groups were day scholars who were living with their families of origin. The two groups were hence comparable on several key parameters and the nature of their course was the major differentiating factor. While the BSW students undergo field placements and their course content involves an understanding of social issues and working with people in distressing situations, the RG students are not exposed to these issues in their curriculum and their focus is on understanding Tamil literature.

Between group comparisons

Mean scores were then compared for all dimensions between both groups and independent sample *t* tests used to determine statistically significant differences at both T1 and T2 (Table 2). It was seen that at T1 there was no significant difference between both groups on any of the dimensions and mean scores across variables were similar. However, at T2 a significant difference was seen on all dimensions except for two components of empathy (Perspective Taking and Empathic attitudes).

Table 1. Respondents of both groups distributed by background factors.

Background factors	SG (n = 34)	RG (n = 34)	Chi-square
Religion			
Hindu	32 (94.1)	29 (85.3)	$\chi^2 = 1.43$
Non-Hindu	2 (5.9)	5 (14.7)	$p > .05$
Type of family			
Nuclear	29 (85.3)	28 (82.4)	$\chi^2 = .11$
Non-nuclear	5 (14.7)	6 (17.6)	$p > .05$
Residence			
Urban	26 (76.5)	20 (58.8)	$\chi^2 = 2.42$
Rural	8 (23.5)	14 (41.2)	$p > .05$
Currently living			
With parents	25 (73.5)	26 (76.5)	$\chi^2 = .08$
Hostel	9 (26.5)	8 (23.5)	$p > .05$
Medium in school			
Tamil	24 (70.6)	33 (97.1)	$\chi^2 = 8.79$
English	10 (29.4)	1 (2.9)	$p < .05$

Data presented in this table pertains to T1 (n = 34 for both groups); $df = 1$.

Table 2. Between group comparisons on all dimensions at T1 and T2.

Variable	Group	T1			T2		
		Mean	SD	t value	Mean	SD	t value
Self-reflection	SG	39.12	4.87	1.98	37.94	6.60	***3.75
	RG	36.94	4.15		30.24	9.59	
Empathetic Reflection	SG	21.65	3.41	1.53	21.03	4.00	*2.27
	RG	23.03	4.01		18.39	5.23	
Reflective Communication	SG	25.38	3.13	1.59	24.34	3.65	*2.65
	RG	24.18	3.13		20.88	6.45	
Total Reflective Ability	SG	86.15	9.25	0.91	83.31	12.45	**3.45
	RG	84.15	8.94		69.52	18.95	
Appraisal & Expression of Emotions	SG	47.53	7.46	1.23	48.34	9.01	**3.55
	RG	49.41	4.91		40.36	9.08	
Regulation of Emotions	SG	42.35	4.28	1.38	38.78	8.55	**3.25
	RG	40.65	5.81		31.88	8.53	
Utilization of Emotions	SG	40.79	5.09	0.45	39.50	7.81	**3.44
	RG	40.24	5.12		31.70	10.23	
Total EI	SG	130.68	15.12	0.11	126.63	24.16	**3.57
	RG	130.29	14.00		103.94	26.82	
Affective Response	SG	15.62	2.72	1.32	14.78	3.59	***4.15
	RG	14.47	4.26		10.39	4.81	
Perspective Taking	SG	12.47	5.13	1.76	15.13	3.12	1.74
	RG	14.59	4.81		13.24	5.27	
Self-other Awareness	SG	12.32	3.19	0.64	13.50	2.98	*2.79
	RG	11.74	4.28		10.94	4.27	
Empathic Attitudes	SG	11.15	2.58	1.03	11.66	3.06	0.62
	RG	11.88	3.30		11.06	4.51	
Total Empathy	SG	51.56	9.77	0.37	55.06	10.57	*2.68
	RG	52.68	14.57		45.64	16.94	

df for T1 = 66 & T2 = 63; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Change in variables over time

Paired t tests were then used to assess any significant change in the key variables for the SG respondents only at T2 compared to T1. The results (Table 3) showed that only regulation of emotions and perspective taking registered a significant change at T2. While mean scores for the former showed a decline at T2, scores for perspective taking increased.

Table 3. Paired t test results for study group respondents at T1 and T2.

Variable	T1		T2		t value
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Self-reflection	39.12	4.87	37.94	6.60	0.94
Empathic Reflection	21.65	3.42	21.03	4.01	1.22
Reflective Communication	25.38	3.13	24.34	3.65	1.17
Total RA Score	86.15	9.25	83.31	12.45	1.24
Appraisal of Emotions	47.53	7.46	48.34	9.02	0.18
Regulation of Emotions	42.35	4.28	38.78	8.56	2.44*
Utilization of Emotions	40.79	5.09	39.50	7.81	0.93
Total EI Score	130.68	15.13	126.63	24.16	1.08
Affective Response	15.62	2.72	14.78	3.59	1.32
Perspective Taking	12.47	5.13	15.13	3.13	2.72*
Self-Other Awareness	12.32	3.19	13.50	2.98	1.36
Empathic Attitude	11.15	2.58	11.66	3.07	0.75
Total Empathy Score	51.56	9.77	55.06	10.58	1.32

SD = Standard Deviation; * $p < .05$; $df = 31$.

Table 4. Inter-correlation matrix for key variables (SG Only-T1 and T2).

Variable	RA		EI		Empathy	
	T1	T2	T1	T2	T1	T2
RA	1	1	.66***	.89***	.41*	.55**
EI	.66***	.89***	1	1	.47**	.56**
Empathy	.41*	.55**	.47**	.56**	1	1

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Correlations among key variables

Statistically significant correlations were obtained among all three key variables at both T1 and T2 for the study group respondents. All correlations were positive indicating that change in one, influences a corresponding change in others. It was also seen that the strength of the correlation increased at T2 when compared to T1 (Table 4).

Predictors of emotional intelligence

Linear regression analysis was used to ascertain the predictors of EI, by treating its total score as the dependent variable and introducing the total RA and Empathy scores as independents. Only T2 data for the SG was used for this analysis. The resulting model was significant ($F(2, 29) = 57.77; p < .001$) and together the independent variables demonstrated 80% of variance in the dependent variable ($R^2 = .80; R^2_{(Adjusted)} = .79$). Only the total RA score ($\beta = .83; t = 8.34; p < .001$) emerged as a significant predictor of EI in this analysis, whereas the contribution of the total empathy score to EI was not statistically significant ($\beta = .10; t = 1.03; p > .05$).

We were then interested in identifying the sub-dimensions of RA that contributed to the manifestation of EI. SPSS Amos was used for this path analysis by treating the total EI score as the dependent variable (DV) and the three sub-dimensions of RA (self-reflection, empathetic reflection and reflective communication) as independents (IV). The model generated along with standardized estimates are depicted in Figure 1. The chi square value for the model was not significant and indicated model saturation and

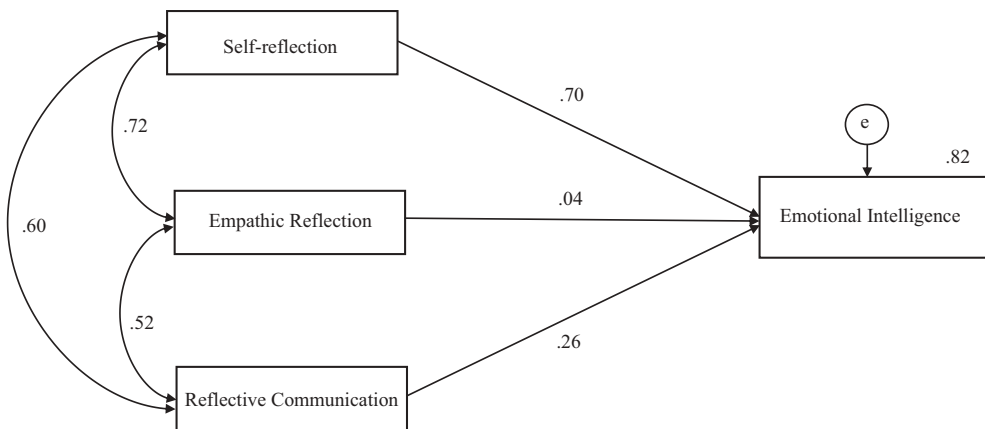


Figure 1. Path diagram depicting predictors of emotional intelligence (standardized estimates).

adequate data fit. The squared multiple correlation value (R^2) showed that together the IVs accounted for 82% variance in the total EI score. The arrows leading from the three IVs to the DV show the standardized regression weights (β values) indicating their direct effects on the DV. It was seen that self-reflection ($t = 5.69, p < .001$) and reflective communication ($t = 2.62, p < .05$) were statistically significant predictors that influenced the manifestation of EI. Empathic reflection was not extracted as a significant predictor. The curved arrows in the model show the correlation among the IVs and the values indicate statistically significant positive relationships among them ($p < .001$).

Discussion

The limited availability of studies that have explored the key variables of this study in social work students restricts comparisons of our findings. An earlier cross-sectional study done with social work students from India with cohorts of students in different years of their degree reports final year students as scoring higher on empathy, RA and EI (Stanley & Metilda, 2016b). However, the current longitudinal study has not evidenced any incremental progression in the development of these attributes as social work students advanced from year one to three of their degrees (as indicated by the paired t test results). This in our opinion is a rather disappointing finding as three years of undergraduate studies have not significantly enhanced what are considered to be core professional competencies in the students.

In addition, the data made two significant points: first, that at course entry (T1) there was no significant difference between social work students and the reference group in the mean scores of all attributes. Thus, at the point of entry, given their comparable backgrounds, all students seemed to share a similar range of competencies. However, the difference between both groups on all three dimensions was statistically significant at T2, with social work students achieving higher mean scores than the reference group. We attribute this to the different curricular inputs and placement experiences that social work students are exposed to. We are inclined to suggest that the social work curriculum owing to its emphasis on relationship and value-based practice and sensitivity to human distress and suffering promotes the development of these competencies in students. It is hence plausible to contend that the 'intervention' which in this case refers to the educational experiences of both student groups, is responsible for the difference in attributes seen at T2.

Second, there is a drop in total scores for both groups at T2 for both RA and EI. While social work students have manifested significantly higher RA scores at T2 than the RG, their total RA scores have actually dipped marginally at T2. This is not in agreement with the cross-sectional study by Stanley and Metilda (2016b) which registered higher RA scores in final year social work students when compared to those in their first year. Decline in reflective abilities over time in students has been previously reported in the literature for example in medical students (Chalmers, Dunngalvin, & Shorten, 2011). An Australian study also with medical students observes an increase in the 'need' for self-reflection in senior students but a reduction in 'engagement' (Carr & Johnson, 2013).

We also have noted a decline in EI scores for both cohorts over time. A study with therapy students in clinical placements makes a similar observation (Gribble, Ladyshevsky, & Parsons, 2017). While empathy scores in this study for the social work

cohort have marginally increased at T2, this is not statistically significant (as indicated by the paired *t* test). They have in particular enhanced their skills in terms of perspective taking, for which they have registered a significant increase. Taken together we are inclined to believe that the attributes studied fluctuate in nature, influenced by internal predispositions and contextual factors. While intriguing, our findings are a matter of concern particularly in terms of reflective skills and empathy where professional expectations place a high premium on the development and enhancement of these attributes in social work students. While cherished professionally, scant attention has been paid in terms of consciously integrating elements that would enhance these competencies in the social work curriculum (Hen & Goroshit, 2011). For instance, while social work students are encouraged to use empathy in client assessment, interaction, and interventions, the essential components of empathy are not consistently incorporated into their curriculum (Gerdes, Segal, Jackson, & Mullins, 2011).

Greeno et al. (2018) report higher levels of empathy in MSW than BSW students and have attributed this to BSW students being younger and having lesser volunteering experience. However, in this study we did not obtain any statistically significant relationship between age and empathy in our sample of BSW students.

The extent of EI appears to be different in students of different disciplines, as we have seen in our comparative analysis. This observation is in line with earlier studies that have compared other groups of undergraduates. For example, a comparison of nursing and engineering students has shown that EI was significantly different between them (Štiglic et al., 2018). A longitudinal study of students in a pre-registration nursing programme provides evidence of increase in EI scores over the duration of the degree (Foster et al. (2017). However, the paired *t* test results in this study do not provide evidence of incremental development as students progressed through their social work degree.

This study has demonstrated a positive correlation between the total scores of the three key variables investigated. This is in agreement with other studies done with social work students (Grant & Kinman, 2014; Stanley & Mettilda, 2016a) and with women social work practitioners in India (Stanley, Mettilda, & Meenakshi, 2018) that have also established positive correlations between these attributes. A significant implication of these correlations is that efforts to increase one of the attributes would positively enhance the others. The positive relationship obtained between RA and EI in this study is in agreement with the findings of Stedman and Andenoro (2007) who found a positive relationship between EI and critical thinking in undergraduate students.

Empathy has been considered to be a key component of EI (Ioannidou & Konstantikaki, 2008) but has not been extracted as a significant predictor in this study. The correlation seen between RA and EI scores and that the regressions have extracted RA as a significant predictor of EI, supports the contention that the emotionally intelligent social worker is one who is a reflective practitioner (Ingram, 2013). Further, in terms of reflective skills, the data reveal that self-reflection and reflective communication are most important.

Implications for social work education

Our findings indicate the need and potential scope to enhance professional competencies in social work students through the provision of appropriate classroom and placement

experiences. There needs to be a concerted effort to ensure the provision of tasks and activities consciously geared to enhance these abilities in social work students and to ensure that the curriculum focuses on the development and sustenance of these attributes.

This study has shown only a marginal increase in empathy scores over the span of the social work degree and this is a pointer that empathy skills training needs to be more intensive. It has been acknowledged that components of empathy may prevent or reduce burnout while increasing compassion satisfaction, longevity, and personal and professional well-being and hence empathy training needs to be an important consideration in social work education and training (Wagaman, Geiger, Shockley, & Segal, 2015). Writers within the nursing literature stress the importance of innovation in teaching–learning in academia to incorporate creative strategies aimed toward deeper learning, complex skill building, and developing empathy and compassion toward the experiences of others (Nguyen-Truong, Davis, Spencer, Rasmor, & Dekker, 2018). The literature suggests how components of empathy such as perspective taking can be enhanced (Todd, Bodenhausen, & Galinsky, 2012) by listening to or reading stories about stigmatized groups, such as ethnic groups, homeless individuals, and older people (Vezzali, Stathi, Giovannini, Capozza, & Trifiletti, 2015). Perspective taking can also be enhanced by involving speakers from stigmatized groups who share their experiences followed by activities such as reflective writing (Gurin, Nagda, & Zúñiga, 2013). Specific mindfulness practices have been shown to promote empathy and decrease implicit biases related to race and age (Lueke & Gibson, 2015). Mindfulness techniques and emphasis on boundary setting are ways that social workers can increase their self–other awareness by being conscious of emotional exchanges in their relationship with clients (Wagaman et al., 2015). These strategies could help students recognize that suffering is a universal human experience and encourage them to use their own personal experiences to relate with the distress experienced by others (Krznaric, 2014).

The drop in RA scores seen in this study highlights the importance of sustaining RA and ensuring that the importance of reflective thinking is continuously reinforced in terms of the theoretical and practice elements of the social work curriculum. There is ample evidence in the literature relating to techniques that could be used to develop reflective abilities in students. Tsingos-Lucas et al. (2016) show how integrating reflective activities into the pharmacy curriculum has a positive impact on students' reflective thinking. Experiential learning, reflection on professional development and feedback by fellow students, teachers and supervisors is important in this regard (Hermsen & Embregts, 2015). The key role of supervision by practice teachers is a recurrent theme in promoting reflective learning (Wilson, 2013). Casement (1985) refers to a process of 'internal supervision' and argues that practitioners' experience of being supervised is crucial to being able to develop the capacity to reflect, self-analyze and contain themselves when interacting with others. More recently, referring to the same process Ferguson (2018) considers it important to allow vital insights about the service user and helping process to develop. He also advocates that staff support after practice encounters needs to be rigorously reflective, analytical, and critical. It is important for these elements to be fostered in social work students and to continuously encourage a process of rigorous self-examination vis-à-vis experiences in practice.

As RA is a predictor of EI, our findings suggest that EI can be enhanced by developing reflective abilities in social work students. More specifically this study has extracted reflective communication and self-reflection as significant predictors of EI and as such these skills need to be nurtured in social work students. Rigorous reflection is a process of self-involvement and self-reflection in which the social worker undergoes self-analysis, self-evaluation, self-dialogue and self-observation (Yip, 2006). We endorse the notion within the extant literature that EI is a developable trait or competency and can be learned (Gilar-Corbí, Pozo-Rico, Sánchez, & Castejón, 2018; Ioannidou & Konstantikaki, 2008). Clarke et al. (2016) demonstrate how introducing arts-based teaching methodologies in the social work curriculum involving different methods of emotional expression and perception such as poetry, music, films and art could enable the development of EI in students. Interventions based on experiential learning and reflective, emotional writing to enhance EI and wellbeing and the development of an 'emotional curriculum' for social work students has been advocated by Grant, Kinman, and Alexander (2014) in this regard. Reflexivity is a core competency for social workers, and it is important to promote reflexivity in students by enabling them to scrutinize their own values, beliefs, preferences, biases, as well as ethical and moral assumptions through self-reflection (Leung et al., 2011). Reflexivity not only involves a greater understanding of oneself but also involves identifying one's own influence on events and that of the socio-cultural world (Fook & Askeland, 2006). Social work education in India would do well to consider how best such key elements that promote reflexivity in students could consciously be built into the curriculum.

Limitations

There is evidence of gender differential in terms of the manifestation of EI (Cerit & Beser, 2014; Štiglic et al., 2018) and empathy (Turnage, Hong, Stevenson, & Edwards, 2012). However, as data were collected only from women students in this study, gender-based comparisons were not possible. The study has also not considered personality variables that could influence the manifestation of the three key variables of the study. The scope for generalizations of findings is limited owing to the study having been carried out in only one college in India and is restricted by cultural variations, differences in taught content and placement experiences elsewhere. Despite these limitations, we feel that this piece of work is an important contribution to the extant literature on empathy, RA and EI in social work students, particularly in the Indian context. The distinct positives are the three-year follow up done to collect longitudinal data as well as the use of a reference group that enabled comparisons with nonsocial work students.

Conclusion

This comparative and longitudinal study from India explored the manifestation of empathy, RA and EI in two cohorts of undergraduate women students in a social work programme and those studying for a nonsocial work degree. Evidence obtained indicated that at the point of course completion, both groups of students were significantly different in terms of these key attributes with social work students obtaining higher mean scores than the reference group. However, we did not find any significant

development in the manifestation of these attributes as social work students progressed from course entry to completion. RA scores were extracted as significant predictors of EI. The findings indicate the need for social work education and training to provide students with classroom and placement experiences to develop their reflective abilities particularly in terms of self-reflection and skills of reflective communication. Conscious attention is also required to foster skills relating to empathic expression. This would in the long run enable young social work professionals to hone their skills in relationship-based practice.

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Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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