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# Self-Identity, Embodiment and the Development of Emotional Resilience

Sweta Rajan-Rankin\*

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*Dr Sweta Rajan-Rankin, Ph.D., MPhil, MSW, BSc, is a qualified social worker and lecturer in social policy at Brunel University. Her main research interests include exploring the relationships between emotion, worker identity and professional practice; work–life integration; gendering of organisations; and global social policy.*

\*Correspondence to Dr Sweta Rajan-Rankin, Lecturer in Social Policy and Social Work, School of Health Sciences and Social Care, Mary Seacole Building, 3rd Floor, Brunel University, Uxbridge, Middlesex, UB8 3PH, UK. E-mail: [sweta.rajan-rankin@brunel.ac.uk](mailto:sweta.rajan-rankin@brunel.ac.uk)

## Abstract

Recent social work reforms in the UK have highlighted the need for social work practitioners to be empathetic, reflexive and resilient. Current literature defines resilience as the individual's adaptive response to adversity, stress-resistant personality traits and the ability to 'bounce back', yet the *processes* by which resilience is developed remain under-explored. The stressors associated with training to be a social worker particularly necessitate such an investigation. This study adopts a phenomenological approach to explore social work students' lived experiences of managing emotion and developing resilience. Emotion is constructed as a relational concept, developed within intersubjective space and as an embodied experience. Findings indicate tensions in student narratives around the expression of emotion and 'being professional'. Critical incident narratives reveal often overwhelming difficulties experienced by students, prior to and during the social work programme. A variety of coping strategies were adopted including active resistance, spirituality, critical reflection and social support. Narratives as 'discourses-in-the-making' highlight embodiment as a valuable analytical lens by which emotional conflicts are experienced, deconstructed and resolved through the process of integrating the personal and professional self. Spaces to develop emotional resilience within the social work curriculum are discussed.

**Keywords:** Resilience, self-identity, embodiment, social work education

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## Introduction

Resilience is a multifaceted concept, defined as ‘a dynamic process wherein individuals display positive adaptation despite experiences of significant adversity or trauma’ (Luthar and Cicchetti, 2000, p. 858). In the social work context, increasing attention has been given to resilience as a protective factor engendering well-being (Bonnano, 2004; Grant and Kinman, 2012), with linkages to emotional and social competencies (Kinman and Grant, 2011; Morrison, 2007), positive emotions, optimism and hope (Collins, 2008; Koenig and Spano, 2007; Tugade and Fredrickson, 2004) and hardiness and stress-resistant qualities (Beddoe *et al.*, 2011). Need for resilience is especially important given the high rates of stress and burnout experienced by social work practitioners (Bride and Figley, 2007; Collins *et al.*, 2010) and staff retention concerns (Kinman and Grant, 2011; Nissly *et al.*, 2005; Searle and Patent, 2012).

The impetus for developing emotional resilience has gained prominence in recent social work reforms in the UK. The Social Work Reform Board’s (SWRB, 2011) professional capabilities framework has set out rigorous criteria for the recruitment and training of student social workers. Munro (2011) highlighted the need for front line workers to demonstrate ‘professional confidence’ and the Social Work Task Force similarly identified the need for social workers to develop empathy, resilience, common sense and analytical skills (SWTF, 2009). In the context of child protection, Lord Laming reinforced the need for practitioners to ‘develop the emotional resilience to manage the challenges they will face when dealing with potentially difficult families’ (Lord Laming, 2009, p. 52). In the rapidly changing context of social work education, while resilience has been prioritised as an essential skill for social workers, far less is known about the *process* by which student social workers learn to manage and regulate their emotions.

This study attempts to deepen understanding about emotional resilience among social work students by drawing on a phenomenological approach (Chodorow, 1999; Heidegger, 1962; Merleau-Ponty, 1962). Emotion, meanings and context are explored as ‘lived experiences’ which are embodied and developed inter-subjectively through the shared, overlapping and relational engagement with the world (Smith *et al.*, 2009). The paper begins with a review of the resilience literature, focusing on stress and resilience among social work students. A conceptual framework is provided exploring interconnections between resilience, self-identity and embodiment. Findings highlight social work students’ narratives on perceived role of emotions in social work and reflections of facing and overcoming adversity. Implications for social work education are also discussed.

## Stress, resilience and social work students

Resilience is a positive construct which enables individuals to ‘overcome stressors or withstand negative life events and, not only recover from such

experiences, but also find personal meaning in them' (Grant and Kinman, 2012, p. 1). It has also been defined as 'the potential to exhibit resourcefulness' (Pooley and Cohen, 2010, p. 30) and 'adaptive capacities under conditions of environmental, stress or uncertainty' (Klohen, 1996, p. 1068). Resilience has also been associated with effective communication mechanisms, in 'crafting normalcy' and providing 'identity anchors' to guide the individual beyond the adverse experience (Buzzanell, 2010). Studies have found that training to be a social worker can be even more stressful than the pressures faced by social work professionals in practice (Pottage and Huxley, 1996; Tobin and Carson, 1997; Wilks and Spivey, 2010). The stressors of being a social work student are compounded by life-stage, relational stress, financial pressures as well as academic stress and concerns about placement (Wilks *et al.*, 2010). In the UK, recent studies by Kinman and Grant (2011) found over 40 per cent of the 240 social work students in their sample reporting high rates of psychological distress. Collins *et al.* (2010) similarly observed that, while social work students reported high levels of self-fulfilment, a significant proportion also reported feelings of low self-esteem and emotional exhaustion. In a recent comparative study, Coffey *et al.* (2012) noted that British students reported significantly higher levels of demands and lower levels of social support than Indian students. These findings are not limited only to student social workers. Jack and Donnellan (2010) observed that newly qualified social workers in England reported a decreasing sense of well-being when they first entered professional practice.

Beddoe *et al.* (2011) provide a helpful framework to identify the factors contributing to the development of resilience among social work students and practitioners, including: (i) factors that reside in the individual, (ii) factors linked to organisational contexts and (iii) factors linked to educational preparation and training. Individual-level factors include optimism in the face of adversity (Collins, 2008), effective coping and problem-solving skills (Wilks and Spivey, 2010) and taking care of one's self (Beddoe *et al.*, 2011). As Mike Bush (2011) notes, social workers are just as vulnerable as service users to mental health problems; failure to look after one's self can lead to disastrous consequences. Managing personal and professional boundaries and work-life balance promote subjective well-being and longevity in the profession (Graham and Shier, 2010; Lewis and Rajan-Rankin, 2013). Skills for self-reflection, empathy and emotional intelligence have also been linked to the development of resilience (Grant and Kinman, 2012; Morrison, 2007).

Increasing attention has also been directed towards broader cultural, organisational and environmental factors. Resilience has been found to have global relevance with cultural and context-specific characteristics (Ungar, 2008) including life-course variations (Hildan *et al.*, 2008). Organisations can also be resilient according to van Breda (2001), wherein workplace systems can either exhibit resourceful adaptation to structural stressors or reproduce institutional rigidities. For instance, lack of supervision and poor

managerial support (Jack and Donnellan, 2010) can especially stunt students' ability to reflect and develop skills for resilience. Morrison (1997) similarly makes the link between emotional resilience and organisational resourcefulness in his description of 'emotionally intelligent workplaces'. This helps to demystify the role of resilience as the skill belonging only to 'extraordinary' individuals and places it within the remit of the 'ordinary' (Bonnano, 2004; Collins, 2008)—a learnt skill which can and should be taught as part of social work training. Enabling students to identify early signs of stress and burnout (Collins *et al.*, 2010), teaching mindfulness (Lynn, 2009), empathy and reflection (Grant and Kinman, 2012), supportive supervision and emotionally sustaining organisational cultures (McAllister and McKinnon, 2009) can help foster resilience.

### Resilience in context: interconnections with power, diversity and self-identity

It can be argued that one of the limitations of the current resilience literature is the residualistic focus on individual skills and competencies which overlooks the 'whole self', the integration of the personal *and* the professional (Hughes, 2011). Self-hood and emotional resilience are intrinsically linked. As Giddens (1991, pp. 53–4) notes, self-identity is 'the self as reflexively understood by the person in terms of her or his biography'. Awareness and mindfulness about one's own values, beliefs and prejudices are central to professional development, but also personal well-being (Lynn, 2009). This process of discovering, challenging and reconstituting the self can often be painful and students may experience low self-esteem and disillusionment (Collins *et al.*, 2010; Jack and Donnellan, 2010; Kondrat, 1999). Being a student social worker can involve a tumultuous process of being outside one's comfort zone (Beddoe *et al.*, 2011), being confronted with distressing subjects (Bride and Figley, 2007), challenging one's personal values and negotiating personal and professional boundaries (O'Leary, 2012). Connectivity of the 'self' within the resilience process enables a deeper exploration of situated individual experiences.

A further limitation is that the social, political and cultural contexts within which emotions are constructed are often overlooked. The concept of resilience thus becomes apolitical. As Sarah Ahmed (2004, p. 4) reminds us, 'emotionality as a claim *about* a subject or a collective is clearly dependent on relationships of power, which endow "others" with meaning and value'. Critical theory perspectives are particularly helpful in locating emotion and self-hood within wider frameworks of power and domination that 'is structural, yet also personally experienced' (Agger, 1991, 1998, pp. 4–5, cited in Fook, 2012, p. 17). Emotions are experienced and reproduced within existing hierarchies and embodied social categories of race, religion, sexual orientations,

class, caste and gender. Fineman (1993, p. 5) expresses the need to take a situated view of emotions which 'are attributed to one or another social group according to cultural/role expectations'. Performativity of emotions within specific social contexts hence will inevitably involve the 'valuing' of some forms of diversity over others.

Identity and diversity are important embodied concerns for social work students who come from different racial and ethnic minority backgrounds. Widening participation initiatives, for instance, have been a positive step in embracing diversity (Jones, 2009), but can also lead to value conflicts between personal, cultural and religious values and professional codes of practice (Fairlough *et al.*, 2012). Aymer and Patni (2011) observed the tensions that may emerge when black students with Christian values profess homophobic views, creating a clash between 'visible' and 'invisible' forms of diversity. Diversity and cultural identity provide important social contexts within which students express/suppress their emotions. Environments where culture hybridity is suppressed can lead to the reproduction of dominant culture and the negation of individual identities that do not fit the field of containment (Sharma, 2006). Keeping in mind the location of emotion within socio-political and cultural contexts, and the connective thread of self-identity, this study seeks to explore resilience as a situated and embodied process.

## A phenomenological approach to emotion

A critical examination of emotion, self-identity and resilience can be achieved most effectively through qualitative enquiry, particularly by using the interpretivist tradition. In his classic text *Being and Time*, Heidegger (1962) develops the concepts of the 'person-in-context' as a way of examining the person's relationship to the world based on the position s/he inhabits within it. This relational approach towards examining subjectivity 'affords the embodied, intentional actor a range of physically-grounded (what is possible) and inter-subjectively-grounded (what is meaningful) options' (Smith *et al.*, 2009, p. 17). 'Embodiment' or the perceptive awareness of one's emotions can be understood 'as a sense of bodylines which may extend beyond physical limits' (Smith *et al.*, 2009, p. 199). This resonates with Merleau-Ponty's (1962) notion of the 'body-subject' in which experience begins with the body but, through the process of awareness and critical social judgement, extends into the social world. This analytical framework enables us to enter the social work students' world and to view their emotional journeys through their own eyes.

## Method

In this study, a hermeneutic phenomenological approach was adopted which examines experience as 'a lived process, an unfurling of perspectives and

meanings... unique to the person's embodied and situated relationship to the world' (Smith *et al.*, 2009, p. 21). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten undergraduate social work students. Purposive sampling techniques were adopted to include male/female and full-time/part-time students currently enrolled on the undergraduate social work programme. Alumni, NQSW and trailers/students on abeyance were excluded. Personal tutors were asked to share details of the study with their tutees and interested participants contacted the researcher voluntarily. The participant information e-mail shared with the students stated that the research study is aimed at understanding how social work students engaged with their emotions when facing challenging personal and professional life situations. While the term 'resilience' was not explicitly used, it was made clear that the purpose of the study was to unpack the complex interplay between the students' sense of self-identity and their emotions as they negotiated the social work degree at university. The researcher was constantly mindful of her 'dual role' as teacher and researcher and, to ensure that prior knowledge of students' personal situations did not influence the selection process, the researcher did not sample any of her own tutees. Ethical approval was granted by Brunel University and written informed consent was gained from all participants. Interview durations were between 1.5 and two hours. The semi-structured interview guide included a range of questions including student motivations for joining social work, their perceived role of emotions in social work practice and their reflections on a particularly difficult life event which they found challenging and how they coped with it. Feedback on institutional support and recommendations for social work education were also sought. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed in full. Identifying characteristics of student participants were masked and names were anonymised to protect confidentiality.

Participant demographic characteristics represented a heterogeneous sample. Three students were black British, six white British and one white Irish. There were two men and eight women in the study, consistent with the smaller percentage of men in social work programmes (Parker and Crabtree, 2012). Eight participants were mature students in the forty-five-to-fifty-five age group, while two students were in the nineteen-to-thirty age group (mean age 40.7), representing the larger presence of non-traditional students (Jones, 2009). Seven out of the ten participants were parents, while three did not have children. One student identified as being lesbian, while the others reported being heterosexual.

Smith *et al.*'s (2009) interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach was used as a guide for data analysis. The transcribed data were coded by two independent coders. Given that the IPA method is committed to a detailed examination of a case, the following stages of analysis were adopted: a close line-by-line reading of the transcript for exploratory themes; identification of emergent patterns including convergence, divergence and nuance; deeper reflection and interpretation of intra-psychic

processes underpinning participant experience; developing a structure and schema to organise themes; writing up and developing full narratives explaining themes within and across case; and, finally, double hermeneutics achieved by reflection and researcher's own perceptions of participant claims (see [Smith et al., 2009](#), pp. 79–81).

While qualitative validity can be explored in numerous ways ([Geertz, 1973](#); [Guba and Lincoln, 1989](#)), in this study, Yardley's (2000) four criteria of qualitative validity were explored, including: sensitivity to context, commitment and rigour, transparency and coherence and impact and importance (Yardley, 2000, as cited in [Smith et al., 2009](#), pp. 179–85). Using the IPA method, the researcher addressed these criteria by being mindful of time, place, context and embodied characteristics of the participants and the way they shaped their responses. Both synthesis and contradictions in narrative text were identified and represented as transparently as possible. The potential impact of this study includes the methodological contributions of using the IPA method in providing deeper understanding of process-based resilience and highlighting the embedded context of identity, diversity and anti-oppressive practice within which resilience can be nurtured as a professional skill for social work students.

## Findings

Several interlinked themes emerged which expanded on the relationship between emotion, self-identity and resilience. Social work students had divergent views about the role of emotion in the social work context. Emotionality in the 'self' was met with unease and fear of being unprofessional. Critical incident narratives revealed different coping mechanisms in overcoming adversity including active resistance, relying on spirituality and re-evaluation of life priorities. Embodied experiences of social work students in dealing with diversity in the classroom/placement underscored the need for anti-oppressive social work education. Students were able to demonstrate empathetic concern when working with service users, even though this also required them to reflect on their own past experiences.

### Perceived role of emotion in social work

Students exhibited varying degrees of (dis)comfort in dealing with their own emotions on the social work course. Fleur describes her first placement experience of dealing with a case of female genital mutilation (FGM):

... my first experience was really quite shattering ... there was this case of genital mutilation, it was very painful and I was quite shocked, I didn't read very much about it, but the fact the baby was so tiny, I felt like oh gosh!



I just felt, just sorry, quite sorry I suppose for all of them, and the parents too in a way. I guess I saw both sides. I just try not to judge on personal impressions, to keep myself out of it, so I wouldn't make any judgements about them.

In contrast, both Adelle and Mary show a growing awareness of the need to acknowledge one's emotions as an important aspect of their social work role:

... sure, it can be difficult to deal with one's own emotions on this course. Like earlier on, I used to be really overwhelmed when I was working a child protection case, and I used to feel just horrible taking a child away from her mother. Now, its not really different or better, I just ... I can just handle myself a bit better I guess, I know now I have to hold myself together till its safer, but you can bet when I am back at home or with my friends, I would bawl my eyes out (Adelle).

Coming here on a course that is highly emotional ... some people don't even realise that they are going to experience difficult feelings and emotions ... if they are out of touch with their emotions I think this is quite dangerous, because they are not forced to deal with them. So if they have a tutorial ... then they are forced to face their feelings about the course (Mary).

Containment of emotion emerges as a common theme in these narratives. Fleur's experience of working on the FGM case highlights her feeling of being overwhelmed and 'shattered'. Shock and horror at the alien custom suggest 'othering' and there is a distancing of the self from the case as an attempt to contain distressing emotions ('keeping myself out of it'). Implicit within this narrative is the devaluing of particular embodied characteristics (emotions) as non-professional (Fook, 2012). In contrast, Adelle and Mary begin to recognise their emotions as part of their professional identity. However, references to 'dangerous practice' and waiting 'till it is safer' once again reinforce the view that self-emotion requires containment, a suppression of feeling in emotion work (Hochschild, 1983; Fineman, 1993).

### Critical incident: facing and overcoming adversity

A critical incident technique was used (Davies and Kinloch, 2000; Fook, 2012) to explore students' lived experiences of facing and overcoming adversity. Students were asked 'Can you share with me a major life event or experience which you have found particularly challenging and how you coped with it?' The critical incident was then deconstructed to allow 'new structures or processes, cultures or climates ... new meanings to emerge' (Fook, 2012, p. 112). In the first extract, Mary shares her childhood experiences of abuse and racial discrimination by her grandmother and the processes by which she challenged this oppressive practice:

I have lived for a time with my grandmother and she didn't like me very much ... and I used to dread living with her and leaving my mothers house. My sister is fairer than me and my grandmother made it very obvious that ... my whole



experience of my childhood was coloured by the way my grandmother treated me ... ummm there were little ways ... verbal abuse, negative words to make me feel small ... , she used to hit me often ... at the time it made me feel quite negative about myself.

Well, I challenged her as an adult, when I was about 19 ... looking back I can't believe I had the guts to actually say to her 'look this is how you make me feel'. It was important to me you know, for my self, to do this ... I have learnt to know that its not *me* [emphasis hers] ... it's her. I mean I have other people who are happy with me, so I slowly began to realize there isn't anything wrong with me.

This narrative highlights 'colourism' as a covert form of racism that occurs when dominant cultural discourses of 'whiteness' are internalised by minority groups (Bhabha, 1994; Jeyasingham, 2012). Verbal and physical abuse has a damaging effect on Mary's sense of self-hood. She responds by engaging in active resistance and challenging her grandmother's racism. Resistance involves an awareness of one's own power and a refusal to participate in discriminatory practices (Fook, 2012). By making her voice heard and distancing herself from the oppressive 'other', Mary is able to rebalance the power structures between herself and her grandmother, and demonstrates agentic process.

Josephine shares her distress when she faces multiple deaths and bereavement in her family and her conflict in sharing this information with her personal tutor:

This year has been very very hard for me. Just at the beginning of the spring term, my brother-in-law was suddenly killed. That wasn't the only bad thing that happened to me. I was already struggling you know, I had an assignment due, and I took some time off work to go for the funeral in Zambia. When I came back, I learnt that my brother had been admitted to hospital for an allergic response to medication. After that ... when my mother was diagnosed with cancer I just felt that this was the end of me, like I couldn't go on.

How did I cope? I don't know with the grace of God, I just kept with my faith and tried to believe that God has a plan. I remember now, that when it happened I didn't want to tell anyone at the university. I felt like I was drowning and I couldn't speak. I know now I should have told my tutor Horace [pseudonym] but just somehow I couldn't. We are meant to be strong to be on the social work course ... But then when I did tell him, he was very supportive. I don't know what I would have done without his help or the help of the university.

Josephine experiences multiple forms of loss including bereavement in the family, loss of self ('the end of me') and voicelessness in not being able to share her problems. Assumptions around being 'strong' give us insight into her perception of the professional role. Belief in a larger plan, spirituality and faith give her the inner strength to cope with this situation. This is consistent with several studies that note the importance of spirituality in social work (Koenig and Spano, 2007).

In this third extract, Peter shares a low moment in his life, when he was facing bankruptcy and the possibility of losing his home:

The most difficult time in my life? I would definitely say it was when I had decided to start my own business . . . we lost the business and had to declare bankruptcy. That was definitely the lowest point in my life. I was unemployed . . . after 20 years of working in financial services to come to this, well it really shook me, it shook all of us. I . . . remember thinking at the time . . . 'how did this happen?'

Peter's method of coping with his bankruptcy involved a re-evaluation of his life. This turned out to be a turning point for him, and in shaping his decision to become a social worker:

Those were dark times . . . my whole life (was) structured around what we used to call financial freedom which actually is a complete illusion . . . in hindsight what I did try to do was unachievable and I learnt from that . . . So when I had an opportunity to reflect and think about all the things I wanted to change in my life, I thought I want to be a better person . . . that's how I came to social work.

These narratives are tied together by the common thread of human suffering and loss of power over self, body and material possessions. The destabilising effects of these adverse events on these students' lives are accompanied by a crucial loss of self. Coping mechanisms draw on both individual resources (reflection, spirituality) and challenging structural domination to overcome the situation.

## Embodiment, identity and difference

Minority experiences of race, religion and sexuality were repetitive themes where student expressed value conflicts. In particular, the 'visibility' of some forms of minority identities (example black students) and the 'invisibility' of other forms (gay and lesbian students) (Aymer and Patni, 2011) was a sticking point for students. Religion also plays a role, as fundamentalist Christian values by some students could lead to a rejection of other students' identities (homosexuality) (Melendez and LaSala, 2006). In the following two extracts, the embodiment of diversity, clash between personal and professional values, and emotional dilemmas emerging from this are narrated by students. In the first abstract, Clarissa recounts her struggle with being a lesbian woman facing homophobia in the classroom:

The only place I haven't come out, I haven't come out to the college . . . I was really upset in this lesson when you were talking about gay people and equalities legislation. Hearing people's views, that really upset me. I kind of figured I felt like of all the places in the world I should feel *safe* to come out it should be social work! I felt like there was a split within myself . . . It (being gay) is part of me, it's not something that's out there . . . I don't use it as a weapon. I'm

quite an introverted person about my sexuality. It does feel kind of like leading a 'double life'. Because of the views that certain students have towards gay people on the course . . . I think the university has to do more. I mean (it's) ok to not be racist . . . why is it that homophobia not challenged in that way? (emphasis in original)

Clarissa's conflict lies within her own ambivalence about her sexuality being a private matter, and the need to raise her voice in dissent to the prejudicial attitudes of her colleagues. The terms 'split within myself', 'double life' and using being gay as a 'weapon' symbolise the conflict she faces about feeling silenced about her sexuality in what she perceives to be an unsafe environment. This feeling of frustration and anger is heightened when she compares the more visible form of racial discrimination being viewed as politically unacceptable, even as her own gayness is viewed as invisible. In the second abstract, Shereen shares her difficulties with coping with Islamaphobia:

Being a Muslim, I have faced a lot of discrimination. Nobody believes you are a real follower, I have even been told that mine is a 'Mickey mouse religion', like just because I am white, my faith isn't at strong? It's been really hard, you know, especially on placement. I have really enjoyed my time there, but my practice assessor, well she makes some statements that really hurt me. Like one time, she told this joke and I asked her 'what's so funny' and she said, 'oh you wouldn't understand' and I said 'no tell me' and she said it was about a woman and her hijab. It was awkward and I said 'ha ha, that's funny' but inside I was so hurt by her ignorance.

Shereen's identity of being a white Muslim woman is met with racial slurs and attacks. The use of humour and jokes reinforces the practice educator's position of power and the relative powerlessness of the student. These narrative accounts exemplify students' embodiment of diversity in visible and invisible forms. Complexities particularly emerge when multiple identities are encountered. Thus, when a white gay woman or white Muslim woman experiences discrimination for one aspect of their embodied diversity, the boundaries around the location of culture become more blurred. There is a breach in the 'containment' of cultural difference (Bhabha, 1994). This also coincides with Derrida's theory of deconstruction and the distinction made between difference (binary construction of signifier/signified) and *différance* (the disruption or displacement of cultural difference conceptions) (Derrida, 1978, cited in Fook, 2012).

## Empathy and reflection

Empathy involves being able to demonstrate perspective-taking qualities, warmth and personal distress (Grant and Kinman, 2012) and is central to professional work with service users. Reflexive awareness or 'the self's awareness of how his or her awareness is constituted through direct experience' (Kondrat, 1999, p. 451) is crucial for self-development. The next extended

quotation captures John's recollection of working with a young person who showed extraordinary adaptability in the face of difficult personal circumstances. The young person's resilience touches John and his own position as a new father brings out his empathetic concern for this service user ('corporate parent'). Reflecting on his practice, John is taken back to difficult times in his own childhood which help him to connect to this young person:

There are certain young people that I still remember and that still touch me. Now I don't know if there is a consistent trait or personality that does that, but there is a young person who still contacts me . . . I really found myself becoming that 'corporate parent'! His mother was a chronic alcoholic, brothers were heroin addicts, incest in the family, neglect, like chronic neglect. He was known to child protection for years, and every existing member of staff said, 'the services have failed this young person'. And what captured me about this young person was, his ability to . . . be loyal, *so* loyal to his mother, but at the same time understand resilience, and how to cope, and to protect himself. This is a person who was really on the fringes of youth offending, but he didn't just go off the rails. He understood where to access support, he understood how to manage himself, how to discuss openly the issue that he had . . . someone somewhere instilled some positive values in him . . . When my wife was pregnant and I came back after paternity leave, he asked me you know, how that went, and 'how's your baby' and you know how exciting that was for me. And while I didn't disclose too much of myself, because that was something I didn't think was relevant for my work with him, he knew I was off on paternity leave . . . and whilst horrendous things had happened to him in those two weeks, he was still able to do that. There's *some* element in my childhood, not anywhere *near* that level, but there was some element of difficulties that I understood from my childhood. And maybe that really helped me to understand him (emphasis in original).

## Social support

Social support is an important resource for promoting social work students' well-being (Grant and Kinman, 2012; Wilks and Spivey, 2010). Social work students reported that informal support from friends, classmates and family were essential for helping them cope with stress and gave them a sense of reassurance. Student parents reiterated the importance of family support and being a role model for their children:

Where do I get my support? Definitely from my family, I don't think I could do without them. My children are my strength and in many ways, all the difficulties, hardships on this course, it's worth it, because they can see that mum is working hard to better herself (Kelly).

Effective supervision was viewed as a critical supporting factor in being able to work through one's feelings and emotions and provided valuable space for reflection:

I think I'm fortunate . . . I mean my supervision has been quite good, when I worked in Y you would be lucky to get 1 or 2 supervisions in a few weeks.

Whereas managers here have allowed me to talk about my own feelings, which is really good (John).

In comparison, students had mixed responses to institutional support systems. Support for disabled students was considered highly effective, although racial and sexualities discrimination within the classroom was not sufficiently addressed. Academic tutors were seen as role models and a more active role was sought for them to challenge prejudice and promote anti-oppressive social work education:

I think in terms of people who are dyslexic I think they (university) are doing really really well. I'm not so sure about ethnicity, about how students experiencing ... discriminatory views ... how they are getting support. Now going back to *my issue* (being gay) ... I did email my tutor but nothing has really happened. I would be more challenging of tutors. ... Like when I was at my previous college, there was a guy who was homophobic, and the tutor put him right in his place, and I really respected her for that ... that really impressed me (Clarissa) (emphasis in original).

Institutional support services such as counselling were available, although some students reported a reluctance to utilise these services. Knowledge about these services seemed to be minimal and the need to promote counselling services as essential for student well-being was highlighted, as opposed to these services been viewed as only necessary for students with mental health problems:

*I haven't* personally experienced any kind of open emotional support I could access when I am on this course. I mean if there is something available I haven't heard about it. ... I mean in one lecture they mentioned there were counselling services available, but it was like 'oh by the way' here it is, rather than really encouraging students to go to them, or that it is not stigmatized and make it more of a positive experience (Mary) (emphasis in original).

## Concluding discussion

This study advances current understanding of resilience in a number of ways. It highlights self-identity as an important foregrounding factor in the management of emotion. Student social workers engage in an internal and external transformation as they undergo social work training (Adamson, 2006), and the shifts and changes in their self-hood are pivotal to their approach towards emotionality and capacity for resilience. The location of self-identity within resilience conceptions is also relational. Implicit within students' accounts is the view that emotionality expressed by service users is legitimate, while expression of one's own emotions was unprofessional. Fook's (2012) analysis of self-identity in social work is particularly relevant here, where discursive accounts of professionalism can mean that particular embodied characteristics such as emotion are devalued. While most students initially described showing emotion to be 'unprofessional' during a professional

interaction, through the research process, there was also an appreciation that acceptance of one's own emotions as an integral part of their own self-hood was essential in order to develop a resilient and professional persona.

Narratives of adverse life situations faced by students included racial discrimination, bereavement and bankruptcy. Coping strategies used to overcome adversity such as active resistance, drawing on spirituality and faith, and reflexive thinking are in line with existing literature (Collins, 2008; Lloyd, 1997; Kondrat, 1999). Interestingly, the students interviewed did not show a natural tendency to be hopeful, and were often pessimistic. In this sense, this study contradicts Collins's (2008) findings, but is more consistent with Koenig and Spano's (2007) observations that professional hope is not an imbibed quality, but a skill that needs to be enhanced through training. Empathy and perspective-taking qualities enabled students to better understand service users' experiences (Grant and Kinman, 2012). Inter-subjectivities are also evident here, as resilience in service users reinforced social work students' awareness of resilience within themselves.

Minority experiences of black, Muslim and gay students experiencing discrimination in the classroom remain a serious concern (Aymer and Patni, 2011; Melendez and LaSala, 2006). Several students shared 'feeling unsafe' to be themselves and express their feelings. Social work education can serve as the liminal 'third space' in which multiple identities and cultural hybridity can be embraced. Anti-oppressive practice thus is essential not only for promoting cultural diversity, but also for emotional education.

Morrison's (2007) reference to 'emotionally intelligent workplaces' becomes especially important here. Social work educators need to be in touch with their own emotionality and comfortable in addressing the emotional needs of their students. Recognition that the social work degree can often be traumatic and challenging for students is important in ensuring that they have the necessary support systems to help them through this process. The role of social work education needs to be expanded to include the teaching of emotional and social competencies within the curriculum, encouraging mindfulness alongside critical reflection, mentoring and peer-support group systems and effective supervision arrangements. Further, the assessed year in practice (SWRB, 2012) may offer positive ways for students to develop resilience in guided work contexts. While the small-scale nature of this study limits its generalisability, theoretical advances, especially around a broader conceptualisation of resilience and interconnections with self-identity and embodiment, can be explored in further research.

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