Reflections on empathy in social work practice

- A qualitative study among Swedish social workers

Denise Lazo and Ellinor Vik

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Supervisor: Fereshteh Ahmadi
Examinator: Pia Tham
Abstract

The aim of this study was to investigate what empathy means to Swedish social workers and to discover in which ways empathy may be used within social work practice in Sweden. The phenomenon of empathy has already been investigated in several areas such as; social science, psychology and neuroscience and it remains as a growing subject in academic research. In this study, the subject of empathy was investigated within the context of Swedish social work practice. A qualitative study was conducted by using the methodology of a phenomenological approach. The research questions were formed to obtain substantial information about the description of empathy, as well as to discover how empathy has been used by a sample of Swedish social workers when working with people from vulnerable groups. The chosen theory in this study was symbolic interactionism and it was employed in the analysis along with different previous research. The results in this study indicated that the respondents found it important to show empathy towards the clients as a part of being a professional social worker. Empathy still appeared to be a contextually dependent phenomenon and the positive outcomes of showing empathy may be affected negatively due to distressful factors.

Key words: social work, empathy, symbolic interactionism
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Appendix 1
1. Introduction
Empathy research is advancing in the academic world and it has been investigated in several areas such as; social science, psychology and neuroscience (Gerdes & Segal, 2009). Social workers meet clients in all kinds of situations and it is important to approach the clients with a professional attitude in order to establish a good rapport (Trevithick, 2009). Understanding and responding appropriate to clients is one of the main concerns for social work professionals (Trevithick, 2009), especially when dealing with clients from vulnerable groups and different cultures. It has therefore been suggested for social workers, both historically and in present time, to develop empathic skills when working with various populations and facing a diversity of social problems (Lietz et al, 2011). When bringing the matter to international terms, the Statement of Ethical Principles, published by the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW, 2012) states that social workers should meet their clients with compassion, empathy and care. Locally found in the Swedish Ethics in Social Work, given out by Akademikerförbundet SSR (2006) it has been emphasized that social work professionals should treat their clients with respect, empathic attention and amiability. Empathy thus appears to have a prominent place within the Swedish social work profession, both through national and international guidance’s. In this qualitative research six Swedish social workers have been interviewed regarding their thoughts about empathy within their profession.

1.1 Aim
The aim of this thesis is to investigate how a sample of Swedish social workers reflect on empathy and on how empathy may be used within social work practice in Sweden.

1.1.1 Research questions
1. How do these social workers describe empathy?
2. How do these social workers describe the use of empathy when working with people from vulnerable groups?

1.2 Essay disposition
This study is focused on empathy research and the aim is to investigate what empathy means to Swedish social workers and how empathy may be used within social work practice in Sweden. An introduction of the field is presented in the first chapter of this thesis; the
introduction is thereafter followed by the aim of the study and the research questions are presented. The second chapter introduces previous researches in order to explain the scientific knowledge and concepts used in this essay. The Symbolic Interactionism theory will be used in the analysis of the results of this thesis and it is presented in chapter three. The methodology used in this thesis is described in detail in chapter four. In the following chapter, chapter five, the empirical results are brought up and analyzed in relation to previous research and symbolic interactionism. To conclude, chapter six provides a general discussion on the empirical studies, a discussion about the methodology which was used in this study and suggestions for future research.

1.3 Explanations of concepts

1.3.1 Empathy

In order to find the most adequate definition of the term empathy, the word "empathy" was looked up in several places, among them in the Oxford English Dictionary (OED). According to OED (2013) empathy is defined as *the ability to understand and share feelings of another*.

Because of the phenomenological approach in this research the respondents themselves were asked about their understanding and definitions of the term empathy and the OED's definition was only used when the respondents asked for a linguistic and objective definition of the word. Empathy might easily be confused with the term sympathy because of their similar, yet different meaning. To clarify, empathy is described as an *active* form when an individual feels *with* another person, whereas sympathy is described to be a *passive* form when an individual feels *for* another person (Shulman, 1999, as mentioned in Trevithick, 2009). The meaning of empathy will be discussed further in comparison to what has been studied in previous researches.

1.3.2 Compassion

According to the OED (2013) compassion means *showing sympathetic pity and concern for the sufferings or misfortunes of others*. Compassion is regarded as a synonym for empathy and it can also be described through the word “commiseration”, which happens when someone expresses or feels sympathy or pity for another person (OED, 2013). In other words, compassion is closely related to both empathy and sympathy, meaning that the person both observes the target and engages with his/her own feelings. Compassion is translated to
“medkänsla” in Swedish dictionary, which can be translated into “feeling with someone” (Nordstedts ordbok, 2014).

Even though the authors tried to distinguish between the different words and concepts, empathy, sympathy and compassion were used as synonyms by the respondents of this study when talking about the meaning of empathy.

1.3.3 Vulnerable groups
Vulnerable groups can be described as those who experience a higher risk of poverty and social exclusion than the general population. Ethnic minorities, migrants, disabled people, the homeless, those struggling with substance abuse, isolated elderly people and children often face difficulties that can lead to further social exclusion such as low levels of education and unemployment or underemployment (EQAVET, 2013). In this study the people from vulnerable groups are represented by children and adolescents at risk, as well as their parents, unaccompanied children and students with different needs.

1.4 Delimitations
This study intends to investigate how six Swedish social workers working with people from vulnerable groups reflect on empathy and how they consider that empathy may be utilized within social work practice in Sweden. It does not from these cases intend to generalize about how all Swedish social workers understand and use empathy, nor is the aim to get an exact definition of what empathy is.

In order to interview all respondents within the time frames of the study, also taking into consideration economical limitations, the geographical area from where they were chosen was limited to Uppsala and Stockholm, Sweden. This study had some language limitations because all six interviews were conducted in Swedish and the quotations which were used in the results had to be translated into English. However, the main points of the respondents’ sentences were grasped and portrayed as thoroughly as possible.
2. Literature review

In order to get a general understanding of the meaning of empathy and how it may be used within the social work practice, previous research will be presented along with other literature which will give a theoretical framework to this study. Previous research will later be used for analyzing the empirical results of this study.

2.1 The meaning of empathy

Literature about the meaning of empathy will be presented under this headline in order to explain the meaning of empathy as well as the different understandings of the phenomenon of empathy, while exemplifying how the empathy is portrayed in different areas. The information from the chosen literature will later be applied in the analysis of the study.

Many researchers have been trying to reach to a consensus on the definition and description of the concept of empathy and there have been different opinions on the matter. King Jr (2011) claims that there is no definitive or consistent understanding of the theoretical underpinnings and contextual elements of empathy. Likewise, Gerdes and Segal (2009) discuss the fact that empathy seems to be perceived as being important for social work practice, even though the actual concept of empathy remains as an undefined matter. On the other hand, according to Håkansson (2003) there might actually be a consensus in the definition of empathy, namely that an empathic person is able to understand, be aware of and have a knowing of another person’s state, consciousness or condition.

According to Alma and Smaling (2006) empathy can be conceived as a two-dimensional concept. The first dimension is the mental dimension, which refers to affective, cognitive, and interpretive facets or phases of empathic understanding. The second dimension is the social dimension, which refers to expressive, responsive, and interactive facets or phases of empathic understanding.

Egan (2013) explains empathy as a critical way of showing respect and he points out that empathy involves “an understanding and feeling for the mental states and emotions of another person”. Furthermore Egan mentions empathy as a contextual factor, explaining that “the empathic person experiences the other in a context” (2013:48), which can be further explained
by Tiedens and Leach (2004, as mentioned in Egan, 2013) who exemplifies context as cultural influences, ethnicity, personal style, education, economic status and other type of influences.

More characterized definitions of empathy, are mentioned by Geldard and Geldard (2008) and they include: being warm, open, friendly, concerned, caring, real and genuine and being able to build trust. Gerdes and Segal (2009) bring up the neuroscience perspective for empathy definition, in which mirroring has been used to explain empathy. Through different measurements, it has been proven that there is a part in the human brain where cells transmit nerve impulses. These cells also comprise so called mirror neurons, which are activated when seeing another person’s actions, such as for example laughter, crying or pain. The activation of mirror neurons gives the body a sensation of feeling some degree of the other person’s feelings (ibid). Gerdes and Segal (2009) explain that this is largely an unconscious and automatic experience.

There seems to exist different ways of understanding people. However Håkansson (2003:18) mentions that “…many empathy researchers have agreed upon that understanding is in some way essential to empathy”. Trevithick (2009) also explains empathy as an attempt to put ourselves in another person's place, in the hope that we can feel and understand another person's emotions, thoughts, actions and motives. Oatley and Jenkins (1996, as cited in Håkansson, 2003:19) explains that; “whatever kind of understanding empathy is, it seems reasonable that the process of understanding taking place within the empathizer is, at least to some degree, colored by emotion”.

2.2 Empathy within social work practice

In this part the emphasis will be on literature concerning empathy within social work practice. Different researchers have different understandings of the importance of empathy within social work and there are different approaches and perspectives to empathy. The literature will later be used when analyzing the findings from the interviews in order to get an understanding of how empathy might become used by Swedish social workers.

Empathy has made an impact on social work practice in Sweden and it also plays an important role within the international field of the social work profession (IFSW, 2012; Akademikerförbundet SSR, 2006). The concept of empathy has a long history within the
social work literature (Lietz et al, 2011). Furthermore, it has for years been suggested that practitioners should develop their empathy skills in order to understand and respond appropriately when working with variety of populations and meeting people with social problems (ibid).

Shulman (1999, as mentioned in Trevithick, 2009) divides empathy into three different sections that are necessary for social work practice; 1) reaching for feelings, which implies that the social worker needs to step into the client’s shoes, getting as close as possible to the other persons experience, 2) displaying understanding of the client's feelings by showing openness and demonstrating it for example through words, gestures, expression or physical posture and 3) putting the client's feelings into words, which can be particularly important when the client cannot find the right words or gestures to express him or herself.

Similar to Shulman’s (1999, as mentioned in Trevithick, 2009) explanation about empathy regarding “stepping into the client’s shoes’ Geldard and Geldard (2008) talks about empathy as a concept of togetherness. This means that a social worker is trying to develop a good rapport with the client by going on a journey with the client by listening with sensitivity to everything the client says, matching every move and being right beside the client. As a consequence of this, a trusting environment is created and the client feels safe and cared for (ibid). This can also be supported by Håkansson (2003) who portrays empathy as a shared experience between the empathizer and the target.

The importance of being understood by another human being is indispensable for the client, not least because it can lead to self-understanding. Self-understanding can last a lifetime, longer than any professional involvement which may be passing (Trevithick, 2009). Geldard and Geldard (2008) argues that if a helper has not sorted out his or her own value conflicts, there is a risk that their own confusion will interfere with the ability to focus on the client's confusion, and the helper may inadvertently end up using the counseling session to resolve his or her own conflicts rather than the client's. It is important for a helper to not get to emotional when meeting a client. Social workers need to be in control of their emotions (ibid).
2.3 Empathy as a tool

Literature about social work and therapy skills will be used to describe how social workers may use empathy as a tool within their field of work. This will later be applied with the findings of this study.

Gerdes and Segal (2011) emphasizes that previous researches demonstrates empathy as an important tool for positive therapeutic interventions. For example, the antisocial behavior of children and adolescent clients are inhibited through the experience of empathy through treatment (ibid). Also the practitioner's own level of empathy, attention and positive regards is essential for the effective outcomes for the clients.

Empathy can be used both through words and body language (Trevithick, 2009) and according to Gerdes and Segal (2011) empathy is about being active. However feeling empathy is one thing, placing the empathic understanding into words could be more difficult (ibid). In some cases, empathy can be taught, increased, refined, and mediated to prepare professionals to become more skillful and resilient. Understanding how empathy works can help social workers in their everyday work connect more empathically with clients from a wider range of socio-cultural backgrounds while making themselves less vulnerable to becoming overwhelmed, burnt out, or dysfunctionally enmeshed with clients (Gerdes & Segal, 2011). In conclusion it can be said that the existence of empathy is important within social relationships and helping processes (King Jr, 2011).

Rogers (1951) put great focus on the Client-Centered Therapy and he claimed that a counselor who is effective in this kind of therapy should hold a coherent and developing set of attitudes deeply imbedded within him or herself, a system of attitudes which is implemented by techniques and methods. Rogers (1951) claimed that a counselor is doomed to be unsuccessful if the method used is not genuinely in line with his or her own attitudes. One of the primary points that Rogers emphasized was the counselor’s attitude towards the worth and the significance of the client as an individual. Rogers' Client Centered Therapy emphasizes the idea that clients who receive empathic understanding will be better able to trust and understand themselves and make behavioral changes in positive directions (Håkansson, 2003).
Rogers (1957) emphasized three core characteristics for a counselor when meeting a client: congruence, empathic understanding and unconditional positive regard. Rogers’ (1975) Client Centered Therapy claims that a high degree of empathy is possibly the most potent factor in bringing about change and learning and that the ideal counselor should first of all be empathic. Experiencing with the client is not in terms of emotional identification on the counselor's part, but rather an empathic identification. This means that the counselor perceives the hates and hopes and fears of the client through immersion in an empathic process, but without personally experiencing the emotions. The more experienced a counselor is the more likely he is to be empathic, also the better integrated the counselor is within himself, the higher the degree of empathy he exhibits. However, a personality disturbance in the counselor goes along with a lower empathic understanding (ibid).

2.4 Professional attitude and ethical conduct for social workers

A previous study done by Holm (2002) about empathy and professional attitudes among social workers will shortly be presented in this part. Also general guidelines for professional social work practitioners will be presented in accordance with what is stated by the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW). The guidelines, together with Holm’s study will later be applied on the findings of this study.

The term professional attitude can be defined as the ambition to be guided in one's professional practice by that which is beneficial to the client and fulfills his or her legitimate needs, which according to Holm (2002) implies two specific demands. The first demand involves social workers to accept that the relationship to their client is not one of equality and reciprocity. Holm (2002) explains that respect, attention, caring, empathy and the social worker's professional knowledge are all a part of a required professional attitude. Putting similar demands on the client is out of the question considering the client’s exposed position as an individual who is in need of help (ibid). The second demand required of the social worker is self-awareness. Only when social workers are aware of their own feelings and needs are they able to control them and consciously decide how to handle them so that they will not be acted out on their clients (Holm, 2002).

Further on, there are general international guidelines presented by IFSW (2012) which can be found in ethical statements and guidelines. The codes of conducts include the principal parts
to how a social worker should practice. For example, social workers are expected to maintain and develop the necessary skills to do their job and they have the responsibility to take the required steps to care for themselves personally and professionally in their workplace and in the society in order to make sure that they are able to deliver proper service to their clients (IFSW, 2012). Among other several points, it is also important to “…act in relation to the people using their services with compassion, empathy and care” (IFSW, 2012, §5:4). Social workers function both as helpers and controllers and they are often in the middle of conflicting interests due to limited resources and societal demands for effectiveness and utility (IFSW, 2012). However, they still need to protect the interest of their clients (ibid). It is also important for a social worker to encourage and respect people’s right for self-determination and treating each person as a whole, taking into consideration the context of the person’s situation and seeing all aspects of the person’s life (ibid). Ultimately, social workers should be encouraged to engage in ethical debates with their co-workers and employees, taking responsibility for the act of making ethically informed decisions (IFSW, 2012).

2.5 Occupational stress

One of the questions in this research concerns situations when it can be difficult for a social worker to show empathy. In this part there will be a short description of occupational stress and the effects of it. This will later be applied to the analysis of the data gathered in this study.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2013) a healthy job is one where the pressure on the employees are appropriate in relation to their abilities and resources. Other factors for a healthy job are the amount of control the employees have over their work as well as the support they receive. Work-related stress may occur when employees are represented with work demands and pressures that do not match their knowledge and abilities. Stress occurs in a wide range of work circumstances, but is often made worse when employees feel that they have little support from supervisors and colleagues, as well as little control over work processes (ibid). The experience of stress can alter the way individuals feel, think and behave, and can also produce changes in their physiological function. Many of these changes simply represent, in themselves, a modest dysfunction and possibly some associated discomfort. Many are easily reversible although still damaging to the quality of life at the time. For some workers and under some circumstances, they might translate into poor performance at work. The negative effects of stress can be difficulties sleeping, restlessness, being irritated, aggressive, worried, having difficulties concentrating and sometimes also experiencing pain. When being
stressed for a long time the effects can change and instead a person can become very tired and have no energy at all, as well as feeling depressed. (Karolinska institutets folkhälsoakademi, 2009).

3. Coupling to theory

The chosen theory for this research is symbolic interactionism. The reason why symbolic interactionism has been chosen as a theoretical basis to this study is because it has its focus on the social interaction between people. Social interaction is something that social workers experience a lot within their practice. This research has its focus on empathy and how it is used within the role of a social worker, specifically focusing on the context of Swedish social work profession. From a symbolic interactionism perspective, empathy can be seen as a symbolic phenomenon which constitutes of gestures and may be expressed during the course of social interactions between social workers and their clients. The symbolic interactionism theory will later be brought up in the result and analysis chapter in order to explain the data while seeking to answer the aim of the study.

3.1 Symbolic interactionism and social interactionism

Symbolic interactionism and perspectives
Charon (2009) speaks of perspectives as ways of seeing the truth from different views. He describes the seeker of truth as a person which needs to look at things from different perspectives other than his own, “for whatever is seen can be only part of the real situation” (2009). According to Charon, perspectives are situational. He then points out that we may change our perspectives in accordance to the roles we use in different situations, for example acquiring the perspective of a mother or the perspective of a student in school, depending on which perspective we estimate is the necessary one to apply for the situation given. Charon further explains that perspectives are like conceptual frameworks which embody a set of values, assumptions and beliefs which also help us to regulate our perceptions and keep control of our behavior. Perspectives may color our perceptions, and we should not confuse one with the other. Charon (2009) explained that perspectives are like “eyeglasses” we apply in different situations and they may affect the way we perceive things.
“No object can simply be understood from only one perspective. Many perspectives can be used to see the same object, and each might tell us something important about the object” (Charon, 2009: 11)

Some type of symbols
Charon (2009) describes words, acts and physical objects as symbols of everyday life. In this study the focus has been on symbolic words and symbolic actions within social work practice.

According to Charon (2009), words are considered to be the easiest symbols to recognize, as well as being the most used and the most important. In regards to symbolic actions, only the intentional actions are considered to be symbols for ourselves. Nonetheless, actions can still become unintentional social actions depending on how the other observing person perceives it (ibid). For example the act of sweating might mean for person A that it is hot in the room, but person B might perceive it as a nervous act if they are for example on a date. Person A might start feeling uncomfortable and nervous when being observed. In the end it becomes a symbol to both persons, but not truly a shared symbolic action.

Symbolic interactionism and social interaction

Social interaction is, according to Charon (2009) the actual essence of symbolic interactionism because one can only exchange symbolic actions through social interactions. Furthermore, social interaction is about dynamic and social activities which take place among actors. Charon (2009) explains that interaction builds up each person’s actions over time, which partly depends on what others do in the situation in relation to them.

“Interaction means that actors take one another into account, communicate, and interpret one another as they go along” (Charon, 2001:150).

Therefore one does not only influence another, instead the actors constantly influence each other as they act back and forth. Human action is caused not only by interactions between individuals but also by interaction within the individual him/herself. This means that people act according to how they are thinking in the specific situation that they are in (Charon, 2009).

Charon explains social interaction as something that is built on social action, there is no division. Referring to other actors who have put interest on social interaction, Charon brings up the famous quotation of “it takes two to tango”, also underpinning the process of give-and-
take. Charon (2009) claims that we depend on what other people do and therefore we never know exactly what we will do in our next stream of action.

“Social interaction is an action that is 1. symbolic and 2. involves continuously taking the role of the other. We intentionally communicate to one another and we constantly interpret one another’s actions by taking the perspective of the other.” (Charon, 2001:151)

Social actions are more or less intentioned and therefore they are symbolic (Charon, 2009). It is about interpreting the other person and then act upon that interpretation. A way of becoming involved in a social interaction is through role taking, for the reason that the adjustment of actions happens when we face another person who we want to communicate with (Charon, 2009).

**Social actions**

According to Charon (2009), people affect each other constantly through social actions. He explains that a person may at times acquire the role of a social actor, influencing other people; or instead, become influenced under the role of a social subject (ibid). Charon highlights Herbert Blumer’s teachings, pointing out that our own awareness and interpretations of other people’s actions are important for directing our own actions (Charon, 2009). Social action thus, affects us in various ways. To explain it further, everything that brings us to take action in relation to other people, for example dressing up for ourselves as well as for others, is a social action (ibid). In the end, Charon continues, our acts are meant to communicate something to others and “almost all social actions are symbolic to some extent” (Charon, 2001:150).

**The self**

Charon (2009) explains that in the same way we act towards other people we also act towards ourselves through our symbols. We are actors who speak to our “self” constantly (Charon, 2009). Herbert Mead (1934:173) clarifies that

“…the essence of the self is cognitive... it lies in the internalized conversation of gesture which constitutes thinking, or in terms of which thought or reflection proceeds”
Charon (2009) agrees with Mead by acknowledging that when we think we are actually speaking to ourselves and reflecting. We communicate with ourselves and therefore it is possible for us to see ourselves, which is how we establish an identity and self-concept and are able to steer and control ourselves as we act (Charon, 2009). When communicating to ourselves we also evaluate our own action in the situation we find ourselves within. Charon (2009) refers to the self as “me” and claims that it has been socially created since the childhood. We talk to the self as a being an object all the time, and that is what is meant by thinking (ibid).
4. Methodology

This chapter presents the method chosen in order to fulfill the aim of the study, which is to investigate what empathy can mean to Swedish social workers and discover in which ways empathy may be used within social work practice in Sweden.

4.1. Preliminary understanding

Before conducting this study the authors of the thesis were familiar with the subject of empathy, however they did not have much preliminary understanding of the meaning of empathy and how it may be used within social work practice. Having “empathic skills” is regularly brought up when searching for jobs as a social worker in Sweden and it is also mentioned in the code of conduct published by the IFSW (2012) and therefore it seemed important to do a research about the area. The concern of the subject of empathy is based on the authors own experience that the subject has not been covered in depth within their social work studies. The social work profession can be somewhat challenging and the authors concern before conducting this study was that social workers can become cynical and bitter over time if they do not know how to utilize empathic skills in a professional manner. Additionally, the assumption from the authors lay upon that perhaps social workers who have been working for a long time might show less empathy towards their clients, whereas the newly graduated social workers would show more empathy and be more emotionally involved with their clients. The authors perceived empathy as an important factor within their future profession and decided it would be interesting to conduct a study in this area.

4.2. Research design

Previous research about empathy have been studied for the construction of this thesis, and both qualitative and quantitative researches were taken into consideration. However, for the aim of this thesis it seemed to be more practical to focus on a qualitative approach in order to gather more descriptive data. According to Patton (2002), qualitative research can be done in three different ways; through interviews, observations or literature analysis. An exploratory interview method was used in this study and a semi-structured interview technique was applied for each of the interviews (cf. Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). More about how the interviews were conducted will be described later in this chapter.
4.3 Choice of literature
A starting point for this study was to find information about “empathy” and “empathy within social work” by doing a literature research on books and articles. The chosen articles were peer reviewed and they were found on databases such as EBSCO host, Discovery, SAGE Journals and Google Scholar. A number of relevant articles where found in the databases, specifically by doing research on words such as: “empathy”, “social work”, “theory”, “altruism”, “compassion”, “theory of mind”, “symbolic interactionism”, “ethical guidelines” and “Carl Rogers”. From the rich material which was found in the databases, emphasis was made on the literature with most relevance to the subject of this thesis and the most recently published articles.

4.4 Mode of procedure
The data was collected through semi-structured interviews with six social workers, by using an interview guide (appendix 1). The respondents were chosen through a purposive sampling (cf. Grinnel & Unrau, 2011) Respondents participating in this study were between 28 and 62 years old, and the duration of their time working as social workers varied between from 4 months to up to 30 years. The respondents were currently working within the social services, in treatment centers for children and adolescents and as a school counselor in Uppsala and Stockholm, Sweden. All the interviews were conducted daytime at the respondents’ workplaces. The interviews lasted between 30 - 60 minutes and each of the interviews was recorded. Both of the authors participated in all of the interviews. However during the interviews only one was asking the questions, while the other one were taking notes, and could ask some additional questions in the end.

4.5 Tools of analysis
The essay emanates from a phenomenological epistemology in accordance to Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) who explain phenomenology as a way of interpreting the research data through an openness in which the rich descriptions of the respondents were the prominent factors which were used specifically to answer the research questions and the aim. Phenomenology takes an interest in the understanding of a social phenomenon from the actors' own perspectives and describing the world as experienced by the subjects, with the
assumption that the important reality is what people perceive it to be (Grinnel & Unrau, 2011). The social workers perspective on empathy has been investigated in this research through open-ended questions, which gave the respondents the chance to give in-depth answers and thoroughly explain their point of their views.

The interviews were recorded with two different audio recorders, as a precaution if one of them would malfunction. Both authors participated in the interviews, switching turns on conducting the interviews or taking notes. The transcriptions were done by the authors as soon as possible after the interviews. The authors transcribed three interviews each. During the transcribing process each interview was thoroughly listened to and the transcriptions were made verbatim, pauses and emotional expression such as laughs and sighs were also noted (c.f. Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The transcriptions were read thoroughly and data analysis was conducted by focusing on meaning (c.f. Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). This means that the interview data was broken into manageable segments and one or more keywords were attached to a text segment in order to permit later retrieval of the segment (c.f. Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The coding was done with focus on the research questions.

4.6 Essay credibility

4.6.1. Reliability

Reliability relates to the consistency and trustworthiness of research findings. It is important to thoroughly show how the research is carried out in order for the study to be reliable and reproducible at another time by other researchers (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Before conducting the interviews test-interviews were done. After the test-interviews, the respondents were asked to give comments on the questions and changes were made before conducting the interviews for the real study. When doing the interviews follow up questions was asked to ensure that the answers were correctly understood (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). However, the researchers of the study are novices in the field of interviewing and interpreting and therefore the reliability of the study can have been affected (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009). For the study quotes were translated from Swedish to English, which might have caused lower reliability due to difficulty to convey the actual, real meaning of what the respondent has said (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009).
4.6.2 Internal validity

Validity within a qualitative study refers to whether the study has achieved what was intended to be studied (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). According to Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) the validity of a research rests on the quality of the researcher’s craftsmanship throughout an investigation, where the researcher continually checks, questions, and theoretically interprets the findings. This is something that has been taken into consideration during the research process. During the interview, questions were asked strategically in order to confirm the meaning of the answers. Even though the authors were open to new inputs and perspectives from the respondents, the aim of the research remained as the main focus during the interview sessions.

4.6.3 Generalizability

In this study, six persons were interviewed and it is not possible to draw general conclusions to the research questions, moreover Kvale and Brinkmann, (2009) mentions there will always be difficulties when attempting to draw general conclusions in a qualitative research. However, if the sample of social workers would have been larger and representable for its unit it might have been possible to make an analytical generalization by using previous research and looking into similar patterns which can strengthen the results (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009).

4.7 Ethical aspects

Ethical considerations have been present during the entire process of the data collection and have also had a prominent influence during the rest of the research process. The suggestions found in Kvale and Brinkmann (2009), along with the Swedish Research Council (SRC, 2002) were taken into consideration. The following ethical principles are intended to deliver standards for the relationship between researchers and respondents.

4.7.1 The demand for Information

The researcher shall inform the respondents about the current purpose of the research (SRC, 2002).

In accordance with SRC (2002), this ethical research demand was followed as the respondents were informed about the overall purpose of the study and the main features of the design, as
well as of any possible risks and benefits from participating in the degree project (cf. Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The researcher gave the appropriate information to each of the respondents in order for the respondents to know what the study is about and to have an option to either participate in the study, or withdraw at any time. In this study there were also managers involved during the beginning of the interview process. The managers were contacted and informed about the study and subsequently asked for their permission to “lend” some of the social workers in their working place during working hours. When having the permission to interview some of the social workers of the respective place, the social workers were once again informed about the aim of the study. Confidentiality was assured and the collected information was to be used carefully in order to not expose any of the respondents.

4.7.2 The consent requirement

Participants in the study have the right to determine over their involvement (SRC, 2002)

This study only involved adult respondents and their consent was affirmed orally in the beginning of each interview session. Additionally, an oral consent was requested by each of the participants in order to record the interviews. Then recordings would afterwards become transcribed and be kept safely among the authors of this paper.

4.7.3 The demand for confidentiality

Details of all of the people included in a study should be given the best possible confidentiality and their personal data shall be stored in such a way that unauthorized persons cannot take advantage of them (SRC, 2002).

One part of qualitative study is that it sometimes comprises sensitive material which may involve private information from several people. Regardless of the changes of names during the interview sessions, a person can be pointed out quite easily if the information comes out in public. The information collected through this study was eliminated after the final draft.
4.7.4 The usage demand

Information collected about individuals through the interviews can only be used for research purposes (SRC, 2002).

This means that the collected information is not due to be used for spreading commercial or other non-scientific purposes. The usage of the information collected through this study was only used for this particular thesis.

4.7.5 The role of the researcher

The interviewer and his or her behaviour before and during the study will always have an effect on the respondents (c.f. Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009) and this was something that the authors of this study will take into consideration. During the interviews, as well as during the whole research process, the authors tried to be objective and not let their own opinions affect the study. It is a fact that cultures can affect the way people think. Therefore, since both of the authors have a non-Swedish cultural background, this will be taken into consideration in order to avoid any cultural biases.

The respondents of this study were chosen by both of the authors of this thesis and most of the respondents were picked out as complete strangers. However a coincidence gave the opportunity to interview a person who previously had certain connection to one of the authors. This was taken into consideration and all the interviews have therefore been strategically conducted mutually by both authors in order to be as objective as possible. Also all of the interviews were performed in Swedish because it is the main language of the respondents as well as the authors. This gave the respondents the opportunity to freely and comfortably express themselves during the interviews.

4.8 A contribution to social work and society

Empathy is an important concept within the social work profession and being empathic is mentioned as one of the general guidelines for how a social worker should act in the International Federation of Social Worker’s Statement of Ethical Principles (IFSW, 2012) as
well as in the Swedish Ethics in Social work (Akademikerförbundet SSR, 2006). During the last decade a lot of research has been carried out to clarify the nature, mechanism and function of empathy (Gerdes & Segal, 2011). Previous studies show that empathy is important within social work, because clients who experience empathy through their treatment have improved outcomes. Empathic social workers have also been shown to be more effective and can balance their roles better, and they should therefore learn about emerging research on empathy and use that information to better serve their clients (ibid). Even though empathy is emphasized as something fundamental and important within the social work profession, it is not clear to what extent it is prioritized within the daily routines of a social worker. This is the focus of this study; to investigate how a sample of Swedish social workers explain what empathy means to them and how empathy may be used within social work practice according to them. It is not possible from this study to make any generalization and this is not a holistic study of the subject. However the study seeks to give an insight in the subject, encourage to further research and create a discussion about the topic among social workers, as well as among social work students.
5. Results and Analysis

The aim of this study was to investigate what empathy can mean to Swedish social workers and how empathy may be used within the social work practice in Sweden. This was achieved by conducting qualitative interviews, one with each of the six respondents, who all had a social work degree and who worked within the social work field. A short description of the respondents is presented as well as illustrated through table 1. in this chapter, previous to the results. Parts of the findings from the interviews will be presented through quotes in regards to the aim of the study and different perspectives of the respondents will be portrayed.

Presentation of the respondents

All the respondents of this study are women with an educational degree in bachelor science of social work. However some of them have also expanded their knowledge through additional studies in for example psychology, or therapy education. Many of the respondents also have previous experience from other working areas, such as for child care or within customer service. Additionally, some of them have worked within different tasks in the social work field throughout many years.

The respondents of this study come from three different workplaces, some places were governmental and some were private. The different workplaces dealt with different social issues, such as; youth and children with antisocial behavior, unaccompanied children, and adult education.

It is relevant to note that all of the respondents are Swedish citizens, although some come from different ethnical backgrounds. To protect the individual- and workplace identity, the respondents were named A-F chronologically following the order in which they were interviewed in. The workplaces will be named with numbers, 1-3. To illustrate this, look at table 1 on the next page.
Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondent</th>
<th>Workplace</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Working experience as a social worker</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>18 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>2.5 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>32 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>3 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>28 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>13 years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The data process, namely; codification, categorization and thematizing of the transcribed interviews, is the base of the results and analysis of this chapter (c.f. Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The results will be analyzed in this chapter by coupling them to the chosen theory of the thesis, as well as coupling them to previous research in the area of empathy, found in chapters 2 and 3. By using the phenomenological approach, the analysis of this study will be used to provide partial answers rather than rigorous truths (c.f. D’cruz & Jones, 2004). The purpose of this chapter is to compare and analyze the answers of the respondents in relation to theory and previous research, which may provide a wider and more scientific answer to the aim and research questions of this study (c.f. D’cruz & Jones, 2004).

Three main thematic areas, relevant to the aim and the research questions, emerged from the data process. The results will however be divided into four selected themes. The three main themes are: 1. *The meaning of empathy*; 2. *Empathy within social work* and 3. *Difficulties showing empathy*. When the respondents expressed themselves about situations in which they felt it was difficult to show empathy towards their clients, they also described ways of coping in such situations. Although this was not relevant for answering the aim of the thesis, the authors of the thesis decided to include those comments briefly because of their significance to social work and ethical dilemmas. Theme 4 was thereby decided to be: *How to cope when hard situations occur*.

Each theme consists of different patterns, and the patterns will subsequently become illustrated along with relevant quotations from the respondents. After the presentation of the themes and the patterns the results will be compared to previous research and become analyzed through the chosen theory of the study, symbolic interactionism. Integrating theory
and previous research in the result is also a way to strengthen the results by placing them in a theoretical context and illustrate how the results of this study relate to earlier research and the theory of symbolic interaction.

5.1 Theme one: The meaning of empathy
When the respondents were asked about their understanding and definition of empathy, two patterns were found. The patterns are: 1. Empathy as something abstract but still fundamental and 2. Empathy as a way of feeling with someone.

5.1.1. Empathy as something abstract but still fundamental
In general the respondents appeared to find it very meaningful to talk about empathy within social work practice, and they seemed happy to share their thoughts and reflections about the subject. However it became evident that the concept of empathy was not something which they had given much thought, nor was it something that was commonly discussed within their work places. Still it appeared as if the respondents who had longer work experience as social workers had deeper insight into the significance of empathy within their profession. When the respondents were asked to talk about how they perceived empathy, the first pattern emerged. Empathy was perceived as something quite abstract, but still fundamentally important.

Respondent B explained it as follows:

“It’s probably the ability, to have empathy, you have the ability to .. an ability to empathize, thus knowing, feeling concern for somebody. Feeling compassion. Being able to think and feel into others people’s situations. Ehm ... and how I see it. It is well ... pretty unclear as well. But if you only hear the term empathy, you become the... it is surely a positive term to call someone [empathic]”

Respondent D gave the following comment to the definition of empathy:

“Eh, but that's like, not something that you really talk about. Or I mean, it’s nothing one... You know what I mean? It's nothing that... It's just there all
the time. It's like, not really something you need to bring up and ask about or so, whether we have empathy or so. So, it’s brought up in other ways or I mean, perhaps... But it's somehow the cornerstone when meeting people or, something which is on the whole. Something you carry with you.”

The results of this study, as well as previous research about empathy give a glimpse on the fact that although empathy is considered to be important within the social work profession there is still no actual grip on its meaning. The quotation above is an example where respondent D understood empathy as to be the corner stone of social work even though she was not exactly sure how to describe it. The word “empathy” was perhaps something she had symbolized as something important within the social work profession regardless of whether or not she knew how to describe its meaning.

Respondent F commented:

“I think it’s important that it (empathy) is always alive. That you do not uh, not to lose empathy... Then I think we are all human beings, so one can sometimes be “empathy tired” perhaps? (laughs) But that oneself still tries to uh think about how people experience things.”

As seen on the quotation above, empathy needs to be something that is “alive” and active which is also something that was emphasised by Gerdes and Segal (2011).

According to the Statement of Ethical Principles, published by the IFSW (2012), social workers should meet their clients with compassion, empathy and care. Similarly it is stated in the Swedish Ethics in Social Work (Akademikerförbundet SSR, 2006) that social work professionals should treat their clients with respect, empathic attention and amiability. However there is no definition mentioned about empathy, in the same way that there is no definition brought up about the other terms such as compassion and care. Nonetheless does there seem to exist a need for having a clearer definition on a term that is brought up as an important virtue of being a social worker. Even though Håkansson (2003) suggests that there is a consensus in the meaning of empathy, King Jr (2011) argued that there are many different views upon the understanding of the theoretical underpinnings and contextual elements of empathy. Therefore perhaps it is not strange that the results of this study revealed some
difficulties defining empathy in its essence. However, even though the concept of empathy is abstract and hard to explain, it was still highlighted as something fundamental within the social work profession in Sweden.

5.1.2. Empathy as a way of feeling with someone

The second pattern of the theme serves to demonstrate empathy as a way of understanding the client by feeling with the client. The term “compassion” takes part in the definition from some of the respondents who tried to describe the meaning of empathy.

When respondent C was asked to explain the meaning of empathy she responded as follows:

“I think “compassion” (medkänsla) is a nice word. Because sometimes with empathy, I feel like... I’d rather express it as feeling with someone.”

Respondent D gave an example of feeling compassion to a mentally ill parent even though the parent was not giving proper care to her child:

“Empathy can for example... be in the encounter with a mentally ill parent. When the child is not getting its basic needs met, still one can somehow when meeting the parent eh... feel for her [the parent] and her situation too, that’s even if you have the child in focus and it is our duty to ensure that the baby gets what it needs. But uh, well, it’s probably empathic to meet her with some kind of respect even when considering her child is being hurt.”

Previous research shows different ways of explaining how a social worker can feel with someone. According to Håkansson (2003), many researchers have agreed upon that being able to understand someone else’s feelings is an important part of empathy. Shulman (1999, as mentioned in Trevitchick, 2009) explains empathy as a way of reaching for feelings and stepping into the client’s shoes in order to get as close as possible to the client’s experience. Geldard and Geldard (2008) describes it in a similar way, but they choose to call it “togetherness”, which is when a social worker tries to develop a good rapport with the client by going on a journey together.
Needless to say, social work is not about judging the clients, nor trying to make the clients feel guilty about their actions, since many of them might suffer from psychical problems. Instead, the respondents seemed to agree on the fact that their clients needed to be understood even when the circumstances were not in their favor. This can be connected to what Egan (2013:48) describes about empathy, namely that empathy is way of “understanding and feeling for the mental states and emotions of another person”. The results also showed that empathy was associated morally through the action of respect towards the clients, which also has been brought up by Egan (2013) who pointed out empathy as a critical way of showing respect.

There also exists a biological part of feeling empathy towards another person. Perhaps the experience of feeling with someone may literally be described in accordance to how neuroscience explains empathic reactions, namely that humans have brain cells which transmit nerve impulses connected to what we are experiencing at the moment (Gerdes & Segal, 2009). Furthermore, the cells comprise so called mirror neurons which may give the sensation of feeling some degree of another person’s feelings when watching the other person’s emotional expressions (ibid). Gerdes and Segal (2009) explain that this is largely an unconscious and automatic experience. According to Charon (2001), social interaction between people is not merely about one person affecting the other, instead it goes both ways and therefore people act according to how they are thinking in the specific situation in which they are in. This would mean that depending on how much empathy a social worker is feeling at the moment, it may affect the way on which he or she acts and makes decisions. Therefore, the authors of this study suggests that social workers should be sufficiently self-conscious that when a situation seems too emotionally charged, if possible, social workers should not act or make decisions too fast.

5.2 Theme two: Empathy within social work
The second theme covers four patterns which provided answers to the questions concerning the social workers way of using their empathic skills within the social work profession in Sweden. The four patterns are: 1. A professional way of showing empathy; 2. Openness and respect; 3. Listening and confirming; and 4. Showing empathy through small gestures.

5.2.1. A professional way of showing empathy
This pattern indicates that the phenomenon of empathy genuinely belongs to the social work
profession. However, when being a professional social worker it might be necessary to regulate the ways of showing empathy towards others. The results of this study indicate that there are social workers in Sweden who feel that they need to act and behave in a certain way when having the role of a social worker. Respondent E explained it as follows:

“Then, I think it comes down to being professional in my approach towards my clients. Some might have empathic skills but they are very unprofessional. They go in with all their feelings and cry when others cry. It's all about getting to know the degree to which one should show empathy. Is it good that I sit there and cry when someone else cries? Yes, perhaps in certain situations. But I think more often that it is not appropriate.”

Respondent B also emphasized that:

“It’s not okay to get too empathetic ... or you can at least not show it. Being a social worker is a role as well. It is a costume (to wear). Just like my costume as a treatment worker.”

Respondent C mentioned a bit about taking care of oneself emotionally. She described it as follows:

“Yes, but that (troubled person) could have been me. If I can see myself in the other person, without crashing emotionally... Because I think you should not give into an emotion... You cannot go too much on the feeling, like too much. You have to have knowledge, you have to have the right perspective, and you must have an anchor in yourself and your outlook on human beings. Because I think that on the contrary you might fall apart.”

Respondent C continued by saying the following:

“Yes, I can still empathize with and I can be very sad and concerned. But! I still have to remember that I'm “on the other side”, and in order to be of any help then yes, I still must have a perspective, a perspective that rests on these legs, I rely on the human view and I rely on my skills. And I want to
add more knowledge to my work practice! For me to be able to help anyone who comes here, it is not sufficient that I just have common-knowledge; I have to understand this work place. I need to be able to know the laws and regulations that govern. I have to be able to put the pieces together to solve the situation in some way.

As mentioned in theme one, the results of this study indicate that it, according to these social workers, is important to try to understand the client. However, there is also a need to keep a professional approach towards the client and as expressed by respondent C, one should always remember to stay on the other side of the problem, while recognizing that there are different perspectives to a situation and perhaps different solutions to the problem.

Holm (2002:67), stresses social workers to have in mind two things when approaching their clients; one is to accept that the relationship with the client is based on an unequal relationship; second, is having self-awareness. The inequality of the social work relationship with the client is also brought up by IFSW (2012) on which it is notified that social workers may encounter dilemmas because they usually are standing in the middle of two conflicting interests due to, among other things, societal demands versus the need to protect the interest of the client. The social worker is automatically put in more of a powerful position and needs to take it into consideration when facing the client. Becoming too emotionally involved or the opposite might lead to being biased into one direction.

Charon (2009) brings up the self and how we need to communicate with ourselves. Furthermore, he argues that we talk to our “self” all the time in order to evaluate our next step at that moment. We see ourselves and establish an identity and self-concept, which is how we are able to steer and control ourselves. Social workers meet clients with all sorts of problems and there is a need to “put on a social work suit”. The role of a social worker should be professional and there also is necessary to keep self-distance because the heart may not be able to go through too much pain. If we think about neuroscience, the reason why we also feel like we understand someone else’s experience is partly also because we actually feel a bit of the other person’s emotional reactions. A social worker meets a lot of people and we do not have the luxury or time to get more involved emotionally or cognitively as is required to be able to help the client.
5.2.2. Openness and respect

Concerning the second pattern, the respondents of this study seem to connect empathic practice with different characteristics, such as being respectful towards their clients and being open towards the unique situations that the clients might be experiencing. There seemed to be a strong agreement for showing empathy through openness and respect. Empathy may depend on the context in which you put yourself into, meaning that you may feel empathy to a person if you understand how he or she feels in the situation they are in.

Respondent F stated:

"Then I said, "Even if I listen and understand you it does not mean that I can arrange an accommodation in Stockholm" ...That’s an example (laughs). Or, like... Gothenburg or wherever they want to move, I mean uh, in this case you might be able to talk about other ways on how they are able to achieve things. In a meeting I think it is important to spend time with the clients and try to understand what they want to say. And I think that’s a way of being respectful, before saying "No, that cannot be done."

She later continued by saying:

"In my meetings I always try to think that it is important to try and understand... And to be respectful when meeting the clients. Many of the clients I meet are illiterate and then I think it’s respectful to explain things very simple."

Respondent D spoke about being empathic in regards to feeling compassion for parents with mental illness and commented as follows:

“But then again... That’s empathy, being able to meet her (a parent with mental illness) with some kind of respect even when considering that her child is being hurt”

In previous research done by Rogers (1951), he mentions that when meeting clients a social worker can not only use a method, instead an empathic approach needs to be deeply rooted in
the social workers view on humans, and that it emanates from a genuine respect for the clients. This was something that was brought up by the respondents of this study. The respondents put a lot of emphasis on always meeting the clients with respect even in situations when they did not fully agree with their clients. Trevithick (2009) also emphasizes the importance for social workers to display understanding of the client’s feelings, which can be done by showing respect and openness. Trevithick (2009) claims that showing respect includes listening carefully to the clients' feelings, in order to letting them find their own solutions and make their own decisions.

Symbolic interactionism is based on the social interactions between individuals and this is a continuing process where people affect each other constantly. This social interaction means that actors take one another into account, communicate, and interpret one another as they go along (Charon, 2010). This communication with another person and the interpretation of what that person is expressing is the foundation within social work, when a social worker tries to understand and see things from the client’s perspective. Therefore it is of great importance for the social workers to be open to what their clients express in order to get a good understanding of what they are trying to communicate. Carl Rogers (1951) emphasized the importance of the workers attitude towards the worth and significance of the client as an individual. The correct attitude of a counselor has to involve feeling respect for the significance and worth of each person (Rogers, 1951).

5.2.3. Listening and confirming

Regarding the third pattern the results of this study indicate that when meeting a client it is important that the social worker expresses his/her devotion by showing that the client’s words are taken seriously. Regardless whether the social worker fully understands what the client expresses and claims to be experiencing or not, the social worker can still listen in an empathic way and confirm that they hear what is being said.

When meeting unaccompanied children and youth, respondent E explained as follows:

"Many of our young people feel a great loneliness even if they have many friends. They miss their family and a sense of belonging. Of course I think a sense of belonging can make them feel better. But in that meeting I think that being empathic means not trying to ridicule or make them feel.. not to
depreciate their feelings. But instead confirm them and still teach them that those feelings are something that you will have to learn to accept. And learn to live with."

Respondent A, who meets parents in her job, talked about being empathic in a similar way:

"Most parents who come to me need to feel that I understand that they are having a hard time. That I actually see it, notice it. I'm not only sitting here as a professional and thinking "if you only do as I say, everything will be fine".

Respondent A continued by encouraging as following:

"Confirm them a lot. Never judge anyone. Try to lift them all the time."

In previous research Rogers (1975) emphasized empathic listening as one of the most important tools for a professional when helping a client in a vulnerable situation. This was also something that the respondents of the study mentioned. They stated that in order to help a client, the client needs to feel that the social worker truly cares. This can be achieved in different ways, such as showing respect and openness but also by listening carefully and confirming what the client says. Geldard and Geldard (2008) have emphasized the importance of listening carefully and sensitively in order to really understand what the client is expressing. This should be done in order to create a safe environment, where the client feels safe and cared for. Empathic listening and understanding is one of the most prominent parts of Rogers (1975) client centered therapy and he claims that through empathic listening the clients can themselves develop more empathy as well as becoming more caring and accepting. Rogers (1951) also mentions that when meeting clients one can not only use a method, instead an empathic approach needs to be deeply rooted in the social workers view on humans, and that it emanates from a genuine respect for the clients.

One of the basics ideas within the symbolic interactionism theory is to listen to other people. Because it is only by listening to another person, that one can start to understand what another person is experiencing (Charon, 2001). This is also the core within the social work profession; in order to help someone you need to listen to them (Trevithick, 2009).
5.2.4. Showing empathy through small gestures

Sometimes empathy can be shown in simple and practical ways, through small gestures, which is the focus of the forth pattern. Social workers might not only perceive empathy as an emotion, they can also express empathy actively by acting thoughtfully towards the clients. Respondent C mentioned an example:

"If someone is sitting in front of me crying and is saying "I can't speak", then I say "take your time". And usually I hear "I don't know where to start" to which I reply "just start wherever you feel like."

Respondent A also gave an example of showing empathy through small gestures:

"I want the clients to feel that I sincerely care about them. But how do I show it? I'm not sure. It's everything from remembering if they want milk in their coffee, as well as... that they know about me knowing that they are the ones coming (and are to receive a good treatment), and I know how they like their coffee. Like this: "I see you", not just "now I have another meeting. Just one more parent." But instead: now YOU are here!"

The respondents of this study had some difficulties giving examples on how they show empathy in practice, but they emphasized that it is a natural part of their profession. Examples that was mentioned, of how social workers showed empathy through small gestures, was through encouraging words and by letting the client take their time when they had difficulties expressing themselves. Other examples described was when a social worker did something as simple as knowing how a client likes to drink his or her coffee. This was mentioned as something that could mean a lot to a client. Similar to what the respondents answered Trevithick (2009) also mentions that a social worker can express empathy both through words and body language. Empathy is about being active, and while feeling empathy comes naturally, it could be more difficult to put the empathic understanding into words (Gerdes & Segal, 2011).

Within symbolic interactionism symbols can have different meanings for different people. Words are the most commonly used symbol (Charon, 2009), but gestures and actions are also important symbols. These symbols can have different meanings depending on in which context
they are found. There are different cultural context where different gestures and ways of acting can be understood in different ways. In this study the focus was on social work in Sweden, and all of the respondents were Swedish and talked about empathy from that context. Therefore it is important to keep in mind that these are small gestures that within the context of Swedish social work were expressed as symbols of showing empathy towards the clients. The respondents did not seem to consider that clients from other cultures and countries could experience these gestures in different ways.

5.3 Theme three: Difficulties showing empathy

The third theme on this chapter concerns how the social workers sometimes experience that it is difficult to show empathy within their work. The respondents shared a common agreement that being empathic is something fundamental within all humans, and those who lack this capacity can be seen as psychopaths or someone with some kind of severe social disorders. However the respondents could identify situations when they had difficulties showing empathy. Two prominent patterns concerning how it can sometimes be difficult to show empathy within social work practice became evident, namely: 1. Workload and empathy and 2. When facing opposition.

5.3.1. Work load and empathy

The results of this study indicate that it might be difficult for a social worker to show empathy during certain circumstances. Empathy may function well during reasonable working conditions, whereas on the contrary it seems to decrease under unfortunate situations. However, it appears to be that social workers always carry at least a certain amount of empathy. When a social worker has control over his or her work time and workload and does not experience stress it might be easier to show empathy.

Respondent F explained that she thought that it may be natural to feel less empathy in certain situations saying:

"We are all humans, so maybe one can get tired of showing empathy, maybe."

Respondent B was concerned by the way stress affects her way of showing empathy,
“Stress affects badly on empathy. At least my empathy anyway. Often when I'm stressed I feel I become very strained. For the purpose of survival I kind of narrow my vision and only see what really needs to be done. So I can kind of cope with things. And then it might be that some of the youths don’t get the attention they need because I'm too stressed.”

Respondent E also mentioned a situation when she chose not to show empathy:

"Sometimes one choses to not enter a certain conversation. It’s like sometimes when I talk to young people and they are really upset because they have come here [as unaccompanied children] and they have gone through some tough things. But still I might not want to go into that and start talking about it, because we might not have enough time or I might not have the right tools to help them. Or I know that it’s going to be tough for them to handle if we start digging into things."

The participants of this study seemed to share a common agreement that empathy is something natural for all humans, and that it is also a fundamental part of the social work profession, however the respondents could at the same time describe situations when it might be harder for them to show empathy. A situation that was mentioned by the respondents, which could affect the empathic attitude, is when the social worker is under a lot of stress. Occupational stress can be the result of many different things, for example if an employee has a heavy work load with too little time, or if they feel that they do not have the knowledge and competence required in order to help a client in a certain situation (WHO, 2013). The effects of stress can be that the social worker needs to prioritize the most important things, and keep to a strict time schedule, and while doing this sometimes even neglect some of their clients' needs. Being under stress can also make the social worker restless, irritated or even aggressive (Karolinska institutets folkhälsoakademi, 2009).

5.3.2. When facing opposition

Other situations were social workers might have difficulties showing empathy is when they are being provoked, or if they are met with disrespect and an unwillingness to cooperate. This is something that the respondents seemed to have some kind of experiences of in their work and could relate to.
Respondent A expressed it as follows:

"Situations when it has been more difficult (to show empathy) could be if I face a lot of opposition... It can also be when parents don't think that I'm doing what I'm supposed to do and they become angry and disappointed and feel like it's not working. Or they don't want to show up for meetings, because they feel like it's not working, and (they think) that there are no results. Then I can become a bit frustrated."

Social workers are ordinary people and sometimes and in some situations they can be provoked or met with hard words and disrespect. In previous research Holm (2002) states that a social worker needs to be self-aware, especially when facing difficult situations, such as when being provoked or verbally attacked. Because it is only when social workers are aware of their own feelings and needs that they are able to control them and consciously decide how to handle them so they will not be acted out. Through self-awareness a social worker can meet even a challenging client with a professional attitude. Meeting the client with a professional attitude means that the social worker abandons his or her own need for the sake of giving the client priority; the social worker takes his or her professional role into action. Once again it is important for the social worker to try to see the perspective of the client and meet the client without taking things too personal.

**5.4 Theme four: How to cope when hard situations occur**

The fourth and last theme is a response to the previous theme about when it is difficult to show empathy. The respondents of this study did not only describe situations when they had difficulties showing empathy, they also mentioned ways of coping when these situations occur. Since this was not a part of the aim of this study it will only be described briefly, with a suggestion that further research could be done about this subject. The coping strategies mentioned by the respondents were; 1. Consulting with colleagues or a supervisor.

**5.4.1. Consulting with colleagues or a supervisor**

In the same way that other people need empathic understanding by someone, social work professionals are most likely to have the same need. The respondent appeared to share a common agreement of the importance of regular meetings with supervisors or colleagues,
where they could talk about difficult things and situations that occur in their work. From what the respondents mentioned it seemed like all the work places represented by the respondents had these kinds of regular meetings and that it was something that the respondents valued greatly.

Respondent A explained it like this:

"You get frustrated... Then you ask your colleagues for help or supervision. You say; “Now I'm sitting here with this situation and I'm getting really frustrated and angry and disappointed.” And then you actively ask for help and try to find your way back."

She continued by saying:

"I have become better in taking care of what's happening to me. (It has become better) by talking about it in supervision. Like, “How should I deal with this family?” Sometimes I get pain in my stomach when I'm (for example) sitting with this mother... What's happening to me then? And then I can go and get help with that."

Respondent E mentioned these solutions:

"...Work relief maybe. And talking. For example with colleagues, if you notice that someone has become very cynical, then you might try and ask if something has happened. And talk about it. But I think a lot is about getting relief, go out and come back. But I also think it's about having a professional attitude, to try and be positive. One can think that maybe one should be able to say something negative and maybe one can do that in the group (of colleagues). But you still have to keep a professional and empathic approach towards your client."

The respondents of the study mentioned supervision as well as staff meetings when they get to share their feelings and thoughts with colleagues or a supervisor as a way of coping when hard situations occur. It was made clear that supervision is an important part of the social
work practice in order for the social worker to approach the client in a professional way, and to be able to give them the best possible help.

5.5 Summary of the empirical studies
The empirical data of this study portrayed empathy as something which more or less naturally exists between human beings and which also is a fundamental part of the social work profession in Sweden. The phenomenon of empathy also seemed to be something quite difficult to explain because of its abstract nature; still the definitions which were given from the respondents indicated certain knowledge about the subject which was similar to what has been written about in previous research. The empirical data also brought up empathy as something which could be expressed through openness and respect, empathic listening and by confirming the clients and their feelings. Thoughts about situations when it may be difficult to show empathy were also expressed during the interviews. These situations could be when the social workers felt stressed because of a heavy work load, had time pressure or lacked knowledge to solve a situation. Other reasons for feeling stressed could also be that the social workers had some private problems that affected their professional attitude. However, the respondents emphasized the importance of being aware of their own reactions and not be afraid to ask for help and talk about difficult situations and feelings that might occur, which shows that it is important to be self-aware and recognize when there is need for help or ventilation. Regular supervision was mentioned as something fundamental in order to be able to process feelings, and in the end be able to give the clients the professional help and the empathic approach they are entitled to.
6. General discussions on the empirical studies.

In this chapter a brief summary of the study in relation to the aim will be presented, as well as alternative interpretations of the result. There will also be a discussion of the methodology and the study ends with suggestions for further research.

Aim

The aim of this thesis is to investigate how a sample of Swedish social workers reflect on empathy and on how empathy may be used within social work practice in Sweden.

Research questions

1. How do these social workers describe empathy?
2. How do these social workers describe the use of empathy when working with people from vulnerable groups?

Concerning the first question which regards the definition of empathy for Swedish social workers, the results portrayed empathy as an abstract, still fundamental aspect of the Swedish social work profession. Further on, the results also highlighted the social workers different descriptions on the concept of empathy, which according to previous research is not unusual because there still seems to be a lack of consensus on the concept of empathy. However, the respondents explained empathy as a way of being compassionate and feeling *with* the clients. This respondents seemed to find it hard to describe the concept of empathy, this is in accordance with a symbolic interactionism approach were people put different values and meanings into the symbols used in social interaction. Words are the most common symbol used, and the word empathy can be understood and described differently by different social workers, and also depending on the context.

Regarding the second question which regards the function of empathy, the results pointed out that it is important for a social worker to show empathy in a professional way. Further on, social workers need to show openness and respect towards the clients as well as being empathic through listening and confirming. Empathy can also be expressed through small gestures when meeting a client, for example by paying attention to the client’s needs.
Much of the gathered result in this study correlated with previous research, however it was not possible to apply an analytical generalization due to the small sample of respondents in this study. When analyzing the respondents' answers some patterns became evident. The results indicated that the respondents with longer working experience, as well as more life experience, seemed to have deeper insight in the phenomenon of empathy, and it seemed as if they were more familiar with the concepts and felt more comfortable analyzing it than the younger social workers, with less working experience.

6.1 Discussion of methodology
This study had a qualitative approach and was conducted through interviews with semi-structured questions. This approach was chosen in order to get in-depth answers from the respondents. The interview guide consisted of quite many questions and some questions may have been less relevant to the aim. However they were still included in order to get different perspectives of the concept of empathy and to encourage the respondents to think things through thoroughly. One suggestion from the respondents was that it would have been easier for them if they could have received the questions prior to the interviews, so that they could have had time to prepare. Giving the questions to the respondents before could have resulted in clearer and more elaborate answers; however this was not the wish of the authors, instead the idea was to get honest and unscripted answers.

6.2 Suggestion for further research
As mentioned earlier in the result chapter, the respondents talked about certain situations when they found it difficult to show empathy. They also mentioned how they chose to cope in situations of stress and when they felt that they lacked empathy. Since this was not within the aim of this study, this was only briefly mentioned as part of the result. However, because this was something that the respondent brought up and mentioned as something important the authors of this study suggest that this could be the focus for further research. In this study all the respondents were female. This was not something that was done deliberately, but was instead a result of the purposive sampling when the main concern was that the respondents should be social workers working with people from vulnerable groups. However a suggestion for further research could be to conduct interviews with both male and female social workers and make comparison of their views of empathy within their field of work. Another suggestion could also be to focus on what was mentioned earlier about the differences in the respondents’ answers in relation to their work duration.
References


Rogers, C. (1951) *Client-Centered Therapy.* London; Constable & Robinson Lrd


Appendix

Appendix 1

Interview questions (English)

Background questions and questions about their work:
- Age
- How long have you been working as a social worker?
- What is your work task at the moment? What kind of clients do you work with?
- In what ways are you helping your clients?
- Why did you choose to become a social worker?
- Can you briefly describe what you were working with before you became a social worker?

Have you had other jobs than as a social worker?
- Do you think that the social work profession is an interesting job? Do you like your job?

Empathy
- How do you perceive the concept of empathy? What is empathy?
- According to previous studies there has been shown that some claim that it is important to use empathy within the social work profession, while others don't see it as important. What do you think about that?
- Do you think you can help others without feeling empathy?
- Can you give examples of situations on your work when you have used empathy?
- Are there situations when you have not been as empathic? Explain.
- Considering what you have described, would you like to mention something more about what empathy is?

Where does empathy come from?
- Do you think there are ways to increase your empathic abilities in some way?
- Do you think you can help without feeling empathy?
- There are people who claim that social workers chose their profession because of they themselves have had a tough background: do you think that could be the case? Explain.
- How do you think a person's empathic skills can be affected by going through tough situations?
- Have you attitudes to your job and clients changed over the years? Explain.

**Empathy in relation to the clients**

- Do you feel that you can separate your work and your private life? Or do you "bring work with you home"? Is this something that effects your empathic skills?
- Do you think your empathy is important for your clients?
- In what ways can you use empathy in order to help and empower your clients?

- Is there anything more you would like to add to this study?