

## Social Empathy: A Model Built on Empathy, Contextual Understanding, and Social Responsibility That Promotes Social Justice

Elizabeth A. Segal

To cite this article: Elizabeth A. Segal (2011) Social Empathy: A Model Built on Empathy, Contextual Understanding, and Social Responsibility That Promotes Social Justice, Journal of Social Service Research, 37:3, 266-277

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01488376.2011.564040>



Published online: 29 Apr 2011.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 1493



View related articles [↗](#)



Citing articles: 8 View citing articles [↗](#)

# Social Empathy: A Model Built on Empathy, Contextual Understanding, and Social Responsibility That Promotes Social Justice

Elizabeth A. Segal

**ABSTRACT.** A model of social empathy is described where social empathy is defined as the ability to more deeply understand people by perceiving or experiencing their life situations and as a result gain insight into structural inequalities and disparities. The three components of the model—individual empathy, contextual understanding, and social responsibility—are explored and explained. Social empathy provides a framework for more effective social policies that address disparities and support social and economic justice for all people. Social workers are well positioned to enhance social empathy, and application and suggestions for further enhancement and research are provided.

**KEYWORDS.** Social empathy, empathy, social responsibility, scapegoating, civic involvement

The United States is a nation that proclaims a dedication to justice and social well-being and promises to secure these ideals for generations to come:

We the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect Union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity. (Preamble to the U.S. Constitution)

This is not simply a lofty ideal. The Constitution and all the laws and policies that have evolved based on this declaration put justice into practice. And to an extent, we as a nation have realized this goal, but not equally for all groups. According to recent data from the U.S. Census Bureau (DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, & Smith, 2010), the median per capita in-

come for Whites in 2009 was 71% higher than for African Americans and 105% higher than for Hispanics and Latinos. For year-round full-time workers, women averaged 77% of what men earned. These statistics represent only some of the economic disparities and inequalities between groups. Measuring the concept of social empathy can be difficult and when better defined can lead to more effective social policies that address these disparities and support social and economic justice for all people. One way to measure it is by recognizing the importance of social empathy, defining its nature, and thereby cultivating and increasing *social empathy* between groups.

## **WHAT IS SOCIAL EMPATHY?**

Social empathy is the ability to understand people by perceiving or experiencing their life

---

Elizabeth A. Segal, PhD, is a Professor at Arizona State University, School of Social Work, Phoenix, AZ. Address correspondence to: Elizabeth A. Segal, PhD, Arizona State University, School of Social Work, 411 N. Central Avenue, Suite 800, Phoenix, AZ 85004 (E-mail: esegal@asu.edu).

situations and as a result gain insight into structural inequalities and disparities. Increased understanding of social and economic inequalities can lead to actions that effect positive change, social and economic justice, and general well-being (Segal, 2006, 2007a, 2007b). It is built upon individual empathy.

Generally, empathy includes “the act of perceiving, understanding, experiencing, and responding to the emotional state and ideas of another person” (Barker, 2003, p. 141). For decades, empathy was analyzed and defined from the perspective of social and cognitive psychologists (Gerdes, Segal, & Lietz, 2010). In recent years, empathy has received a great deal of attention within the field of social-cognitive neuroscience (Decety & Jackson, 2004, 2006; Singer & Lamm, 2009).

During the past decade, social-cognitive neuroscience researchers have used neural brain imaging to greatly expand our knowledge of empathy. They have mapped four distinct components of empathy: affective response, self/other-awareness, perspective taking, and emotion regulation (Decety & Moriguchi, 2007; Kaplan & Iacoboni, 2006). The first component, affective response, is an involuntary physiological and emotional reaction to the automatic mirroring of another person’s feelings, facial expressions, and gestures. The phenomenon of mirroring was identified and validated through observation of

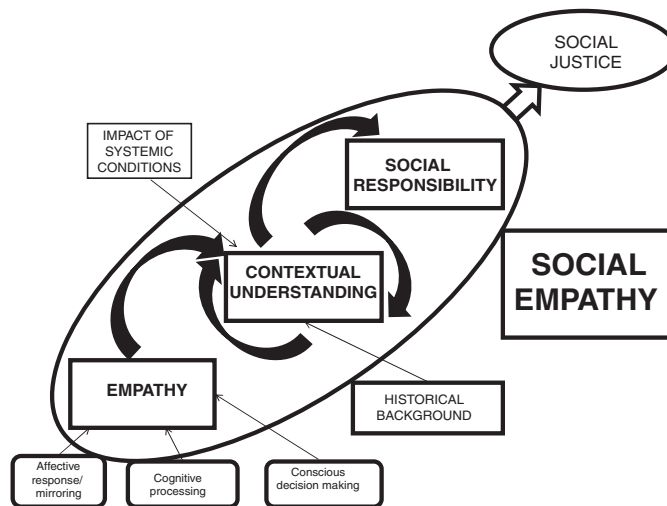
blood circulation in distinct neural networks. We see an action, and our brain responds as if we are actually doing the action.

The other three components are cognitive processes that require voluntary mental activity. These cognitive abilities are: 1) an awareness of the distinction between the self and others; 2) the ability to take the perspective of the other; and 3) the ability to regulate one’s emotions to avoid being overwhelmed with what the other person is feeling and by one’s own affective response to the other person.

Incorporating the findings of social-cognitive neuroscientists, a social work framework of empathy (Gerdes & Segal, 2009) defines empathy as a multifaceted process. The model has three parts: 1) mirroring another person’s emotions or affective response; 2) the ability to cognitively process the meaning and context of mirrored emotions using self/other-awareness, perspective taking, and emotion regulation; and 3) conscious decision making or taking empathic action based on the collected information (Gerdes & Segal, 2009). Figure 1 shows the relationship between the components of individual empathy and social empathy.

Social empathy applies empathy to social systems to better understand the experiences of different people, communities, and cultures. Social empathy is the combination of: 1) experiencing empathy to its fullest extent; 2) gaining deep

FIGURE 1. How Does Social Empathy Lead to Social Justice?



insight and knowledge about historical and socioeconomic contexts, particularly in relation to inequality and disparity; and 3) embracing the importance of social responsibility. These experiences, knowledge, and beliefs combine to galvanize us to act in ways that promote social justice. Social empathy provides the pathway for creating communities and social policies governed by empathy.

This article identifies three components in the social empathy model and their mutually reinforcing relationships. Empathy is defined, and its relationship to altruism, cooperation, and civic engagement are discussed. Individual empathy is insufficient to motivate a society or community toward social justice. The most effective way to change structural inequalities and disparities is to provide people with opportunities to gain deep contextual knowledge and have experiences that create empathic insights into the lives of people who are oppressed. This article closes with a discussion of the implications of the social empathy model for social work practice and research.

### ***A MODEL OF SOCIAL EMPATHY***

Social empathy is the conjunction of individual empathy and deep contextual understanding of inequalities and disparities. The combination of empathy and an informed understanding of the historical, social, and economic contexts of oppression can enhance the measurement of this concept and promote social responsibility while advancing social action and justice (see Figure 1). Social responsibility reflects a prosocial individual perspective that contributes to improving the larger social arena. Pancer & Pratt (1999) define social responsibility as a sense of connection to those outside your “circle of family and friends [and] . . . an obligation to help those in the community, nation, or society-at-large who are in need” (p. 38).

Almost 20 years ago, Wakefield (1993, p. 454) described social work as being society’s “altruistic conscience.” He called for people to be charitable with humanistic passion while creating macro-interventions to protect the oppressed members of society. This view of social work

reflects altruism and social responsibility. The social empathy model discussed in this article is similar to Wakefield’s call for altruism and distributive justice. However, Wakefield did not articulate or understand the importance of empathy in his call for social justice. This model goes further and directly addresses the importance of empathy. Empathy is the foundation or *proximate mechanism* for directed altruism (de Waal, 2009), and therefore without it, impaired measurement and application of social justice can result.

Examination of other groups and cultures through the eyes of members of other groups and cultures can increase empathy and inform us about the impact of social conditions. For example, during the 1960s and the period of the War on Poverty, Robert Kennedy traveled to Jackson, MS, and visited the homes of poor families. His descriptions of the visits were filled with first-hand accounts, and his feelings reflected deep empathy. His position of power and influence as well as his determined awareness of the plight of these Americans led him to push Congress to open the Food Stamp Program to provide for the needy (Mills, 2006). A clear definition and subsequent awareness of social empathy can lead to recognition by the masses of disparity and inequality, especially when the power and influence from individual awareness is not enough to bring about the needed response. When there is a shared definition of the empathic insights into discrimination, injustice, or inequality, individuals are better able and more willing to take action that promotes social justice (Hoffman, 2000; Morrell, 2010; Rifkin, 2009). Clarifying the definition and creating a shared meaning of social empathy can reflect an understanding of social conditions and enhance the willingness to help others.

Furthermore, without an understanding of complex social conditions, individuals are more prone to believe stereotypes and emotionally appealing rationales that can lead to ideological scapegoating (Glick, 2002, 2005, 2008). For example, German Jews were strongly assimilated into German society following World War I. However, lingering Jewish stereotypes coupled with the economic problems of the 1920s and 1930s made the Nazi propaganda that Jewish

industrialists had caused the economic misfortunes of Germany seem very plausible (Glick, 2008). Acceptance of such misinformation can contribute to social breakdowns, the most atrocious of which is genocide. The components of social empathy—individual empathy, enhanced with an understanding of other groups' contexts and surrounding social conditions, supported by a commitment to cooperation and social responsibility—can provide the impetus for increased social justice.

The social empathy model was developed from theory, research literature, and practice. It evolved out of the desire to try and answer several questions:

- Why do some people have a strong empathic regard for the welfare of others, particularly people who live outside their personal realm, while others do not?
- How do people better understand the life circumstances of people who are different from them?
- What is the impact on our social policies when there is understanding of people who are different?
- How do people develop the interest and ability to consider the individual and societal aspects of social issues, problems, and concerns?

Exploring the answers to these questions forms the foundation for the construct measurement and analysis of empathy, social behaviors, and how to more clearly address the intersection of the two.

### *Components of the Social Empathy Model*

As conceptualized in Figure 1, individual empathy coupled with contextual understanding and a sense of social responsibility is the process that leads to social empathy. This process is dynamic and fluid. Although built on individual empathy, the process is not necessarily linear and the relationships between the three components are mutually reinforcing.

### *Empathy*

Empathy promotes positive social interaction through prosocial behaviors such as cooperation, altruism (Van Lange, Gallucci, Karremans, Klapwijk, & Folmer, 2007), and helping others (Batson, 1991; Davis, 1996; Hoffman, 2000). A lack of empathy is correlated with bullying, aggressive behaviors, and violent crime (Goleman, 1994). In addition, primal fears or anxieties and a lack of well-developed empathy can overtake our innate empathic tendencies and result in ethnic scapegoating (Glick, 2008). We need look no further for an example than the current hostile environment toward Latinos—whether they are American born, legal immigrants, or undocumented immigrants. According to the 2007 Uniform Crime Report, 62% of hate-crime victims were Latino or Hispanic (U.S. Department of Justice, 2008).

However, empathy for an individual who belongs to an oppressed group (e.g., Latino immigrants) can carry over to the group as a whole (Batson et al., 1997). It requires the understanding that each person's perspective is "filtered through his or her own cultural framework" (Freedberg, 2007, p. 257), as well as recognition that power differentials exist across racial, ethnic, and gender identities. When we allow fear to override our innate empathic tendencies, it is destructive and costly. One way to prevent fear from hijacking our empathic sensibilities is by obtaining a deep contextual understanding of the inequalities and disparities that separate us. Empathic insight and understanding into social groups different from our own can lead us to consider social change as we are more likely to understand other people's needs, be more tolerant of differences, and be more socially cooperative.

### *Contextual Understanding*

Neuroscientists' identification of the regions of the brain that correspond to empathic thoughts confirms that humans are hardwired for empathy (Iacoboni, 2008). However, relying on individual empathy to promote the well-being of people from different ethnic, cultural, racial, or other identity groups has not always worked. To encourage a strong belief in social respon-

sibility, to develop effective, fair, and just social policies, and to generate transformative social action, we need to provide a deep historical and contextual understanding of the life experiences of people who are not identified with the dominant culture. Morrell (2010) describes this process, “democratic legitimacy,” which he defines as majorities, or those in power, using empathy to understand the effects of their decisions on others. For example, to successfully create and pass comprehensive immigration reform, the American public must be exposed to and educated about the actual life experiences of Latinos who risk their lives to cross the border. We can start by having a fact-driven discussion to answer some basic questions: What are their lives like in Mexico? What are the educational and socioeconomic barriers to success in Mexico? Why are so many willing to risk their lives and the lives of their children to cross the border? Why do so many employers hire undocumented workers? Who benefits the most from the resulting low-wage labor pool? The answers to these questions can provide the rich context that is necessary to truly understand the perspective of undocumented Latino immigrants and gain useful empathic insights that might lead to fair and effective immigration policies.

*Societal heterogeneity is not conducive to empathy.* In a society with significant heterogeneity such as in the United States, it is very difficult to create and receive majority support for equitable social welfare policies. A brief examination of a particularly homogeneous country, such as Iceland, provides useful insights into the empathy deficit that is partially responsible for the gridlock in America’s legislative bodies. Empathic perspective taking is much easier when someone looks like you and has a similar life experience (Stürmer, Snyder, & Omoto, 2005):

We have a hard time identifying with people whom we see as different or belonging to another group. We find it easier to identify with those like us—with the same cultural background, ethnic features, age, gender, job and so on—and even more so with those close to us, such as spouses, children and friends. (de Waal, 2009, p. 80)

Icelanders, not unlike other homogenous Scandinavian societies, have historically enthusiastically supported spending on universal health care, family leave, and other social welfare programs. Support for fair and equitable, albeit expensive, social programs is greater when the programs are perceived to benefit people “just like us (JLU).” In Iceland, policy decisions about spending taxpayer dollars on people who are not of Icelandic descent, or people who are seen as “not just like us (NJLU)” are more hotly debated, and there is often much less agreement (Szalavitz & Perry, 2010). In the United States, the people who are JLU, or the dominant culture, need a deeper contextual understanding of the challenges faced by the people who are NJLU to bridge the empathy gap.

*Context is everything.* Individual empathy is often limited by the absence of an accurate context or no context at all (Singer & Lamm, 2009). If you are shown a picture of needles being inserted into a person’s hand, your first reaction, given no context, is that pain is being inflicted. If the picture is all the information you have, you would mirror the pain and cognitively (i.e., perspective taking) view the event as a negative experience for the person. You might even have the urge to stop the “perpetrator” from inserting the needle.

However, if you were told you were going to view pictures of techniques used by acupuncturists to alleviate pain, you may initially have the same pain or affective response, but the ability to put the picture in a positive context (i.e., the needle is alleviating pain) takes away the strong emotion or urge to stop the other person’s pain. Context and accurate information are everything. When we see people who are different from us and have different life experiences than us, without accurate information and a context for their situations (such as understanding structural inequalities in political, economic, health, and education systems), individual empathy alone is insufficient to lead us to solutions for large-scale domestic or global problems. Therefore, if the understanding of large-scale social problems like poverty is limited to individual perception, it can be flawed or inaccurate. Consequently, empathic perspective taking will also

be flawed, and flawed solutions or scapegoating can result.

*A lack of empathic perspective taking can lead to scapegoating.* Sociologist Peter Glick has spent years writing about scapegoating. He developed the concept of the “ideological model of scapegoating” (Glick, 2002, 2005). In this model, “scapegoating is the unfortunate outcome of the (normally adaptive) cognitive and motivational processes by which people try to explain and to solve shared misfortunes” (Glick, 2008, p. 124). In this context, atrocities such as the Holocaust, the Aremian genocide in Turkey during the early 1900s, and the more recent Rwandan genocide can be understood as consequences of a severe lack of empathy. Glick explains that these horrific breakdowns in our humanity are the result of three intersecting events: The first event is that the process of understanding the causes for large-scale social, political, and economic events is complex and difficult to comprehend. The second event is that to try and understand these complex social, political, and economic events, people develop explanations for such events that are socially constructed and can reflect such false beliefs as stereotypes and blaming of out-groups. The third event is that people’s shared misfortune is explained by the actions of such out-groups, and their actions become the accepted rationale for bad conditions. This tendency to follow stereotypes as the rationale for shared misfortune can be viewed as a hijacking of the cognitive processing, which takes time and significant critical analysis, by the irrational immediacy of fear:

The ideological model assumes that when misfortunes are widely shared, people seek a social consensus about the causes of these problems and an organized solution to them. Genocides, for instance, are not spontaneous outbursts by a mob of frustrated individuals, but are highly organized among a group of people sharing a common set of beliefs. (Glick, 2008, p. 128)

This ideological model suggests that just as the embrace of certain socially constructed values and beliefs can cause scapegoating, the acceptance of a different set of socially constructed

values can be used to support and encourage exploration and understanding between groups. Empathy, informed by strong values such as social responsibility and social justice can overcome stereotyping and blaming of out-groups.

### *Social Responsibility*

When individuals obtain an accurate empathic perspective about the conditions and needs of others, they are more apt to feel social responsibility and become socially involved (Frank, 2001; Hoffman, 2000). On a macro-level, empathy fosters people’s involvement in social change (Loeb, 1999), promotes social cooperation (Singer & Steinbeis, 2009), and increases civic involvement (Astin, 2000). The ability to experience empathy through an accurate contextual lens deepens our understanding of society, leads to a belief in social responsibility, and can result in social justice:

If a person thinks about how society’s resources should be distributed, a self-serving perspective will make him prefer principles that coincide with his own condition: high producers will choose merit and low producers will choose need or equality. If empathy is aroused, the welfare of others will be considered and even high producers may choose need or equality. (Hoffman, 2000, pp. 14–15)

*Conscious decision making leads to empathic action.* As articulated by Freire (1990), the basis of social change is praxis, the “reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it” (p. 36). Praxis, or social action, is brought about through the reflection and understanding developed through consciousness raising (which is a combination of the self/other-awareness and perspective-taking components of empathy). Freire’s praxis also requires an understanding of social power divisions and oppression. Social empathy is a combination of self-reflection and an accurate perspective or understanding of the underlying causes of social problems. Social empathy leads to a desire to take action and to improve societal well-being.

Freire (1990) argues that the oppressor has a vested interest in the status quo. Change is not valuable to the oppressor. Because the dominant class is determined to preserve the social order, consciousness raising is not perceived as valuable and is indeed threatening to those in power. Therefore, it falls to the oppressed to desire change and hence social consciousness raising. Several theoreticians argue that the oppressor–oppressed dynamic Freire describes makes empathy more difficult for dominant groups. DeTurk (2001) argues that social power can block empathy across cultures. Citing a number of others sources (such as Collins, 1990; Miller, 1992), she concludes that the development of intercultural empathy between dominant and subordinate groups is impossible due to the difference in power between them:

Subordinates learn that direct, honest reactions are dangerous, and that open communication is possible only with each other. Dominant groups are left ignorant of both their own impact on others and of subordinate group members' true identities and experiences. Subordinates, on the other hand, know a great deal about the dominants: first, because they must be carefully attuned to them in order to safely negotiate interactions with them; and second, because the dominant group's values, communications styles, and norms are widely disseminated through cultural institutions. (p. 378)

Marginalized groups have to negotiate both their own cultures and the dominant culture, whereas the same is not true for those of the dominant culture. Swigonski (1994) points out that those who are subordinate must strive to understand the dominant class in addition to their own class. She calls this “‘double vision’ or double consciousness—a knowledge of, awareness of, and sensitivity to both the dominant worldview of society and their own perspective” (p. 390). Thus, it is important to be aware of power differences between groups when analyzing empathy across cultures.

*Are we biologically built for virtuous behavior (or to take social action)?* Neuroscientists have

recently explored the underlying motivations for virtuous and moral behaviors. Immordino-Yang and Sylvan (2010) found that virtuous behaviors are not only motivated by conscious, cognitive thinking, but that our “intense desire to socially survive and flourish by accomplishing meaningful actions in the social world derives its power by co-opting systems whose original purpose is to maintain basic survival through the maintenance of the body” (p. 2). While examining brain patterns through neuroimaging, it was discovered that motivation for virtuous behavior may be driven, in part, by our nonconscious system, the one that monitors our biological processes to keep us alive. “The feeling of this motivational emotion [desire to be virtuous] is deeply rooted in the very systems that keep us alive, that make us act, that organize and regulate the functioning of our body” (Immordino-Yang & Sylvan, 2010, p. 3). This reinforces the recent neuroscience research that we are likely to be hardwired for many complicated behaviors, such as empathy and virtue, and hence social responsibility. Our foundation for empathic action is embedded in our physiology. The challenge is to bring it forward and use it to support and improve social well-being.

Having a biological proclivity toward prosocial behaviors does not always guarantee moral actions (Einolf, 2008). We think about doing good things, but we do not always follow through on those intentions. We might be hesitant to act in ways that, albeit virtuous, may not be accepted behaviors—for example, sticking up for the scapegoated person. We also need social values that support prosocial actions. Bell, Richerson, and McElreath (2009) argue that there is a long-standing pattern of “gene-culture co-evolution” for human prosociality. They analyzed cultural differentiations over time and found the combination of genetic disposition and social selection enhances the maintenance of altruistic behavior:

The evolution of cultural rules mandating cooperation between group members could exert ordinary selection pressures for genotypes that obey cultural rules. Social selection mechanisms such as exclusion from the marriage market, denial of the fruits of cooperative activities, banishment, and ex-



education would have exerted strong selection against genes tending toward antisocial behavior. (Bell et al., 2009, p. 17673)

Although we may be hardwired to behave in empathic, prosocial, and moral ways, our communities still benefit from active selection and social support for these behaviors. Nature may give us the basic tools to be empathic and socially responsible, but we need social guidance to do so collectively on an ongoing basis.

### ***HOW DO SOCIAL WORKERS INCORPORATE THE CONSTRUCT OF SOCIAL EMPATHY INTO PRACTICE AND RESEARCH?***

Based on neurological, biological, and psychological studies, the following point seems to be well accepted: “Empathy builds on proximity, similarity, and familiarity, which is entirely logical given that it evolved to promote in-group cooperation” (de Waal, 2009, p. 221). It follows then that to promote empathy and use it to influence society and large systems, we must think in terms of creating more proximity and ways to improve familiarity between different groups. Various studies have found that perspective taking, a skill critical to experiencing empathy to its fullest extent, develops better with higher amounts of social interaction (Eisenberg, Murphy, & Shepard, 1997). Social work needs a model that promotes proximity and familiarity between groups, opportunities for cross-cultural exchange, and the teaching of perspective taking.

Social empathy is a concept that emphasizes the importance of a deep understanding of the social and economic conditions of all populations, especially those that have experienced oppression. Research on disparities and social justice often focuses on quantifiable differences such as income, wealth, and educational achievement. Social empathy provides a model to help examine *why* these differences exist and what can be done to change the inequalities. For example, financial data reveal that race is correlated with income inequality. This level of research is

measurable but does not explain why there are differences. Social empathy provides the framework for those with resources to examine what life might be like for a different race lacking resources (empathy), to examine the history of access to resources and economic opportunities for dominant groups compared to nondominant groups (contextual understanding), and to consider what the differences mean for social justice (social responsibility). The construct of social empathy provides a framework for assessing why there are social inequalities and what might be done to change those inequalities.

Consciousness raising and understanding oppression can lead to change even though it is not always in the best interest of those who hold most of the power. Women’s voting rights, child labor laws, and civil rights legislation are examples of what can be achieved through the power of consciousness raising and empathy. When groups organize based on awareness of social injustice, they can promote social change. By embracing and emphasizing a social empathy paradigm, social work can find a meaningful theoretical foundation for practice that transcends the dichotomies of micro- and macro-practice and the struggle of institutional support versus institutional change. If we operate on a foundation of social empathy, of truly identifying cognitively and emotionally with others to fully comprehend their situation, and then act on that understanding, we can only create a more just society with fewer social and economic disparities.

How can social workers promote and cultivate social empathy in both practice and research? Exploratory research and qualitative methods are one way to highlight “the politics of witness” (Loeb, 1999). Through interviews and case exploration, participants would be encouraged to tell their stories, and bearing witness to their stories can help to bring social change. “It means using them [the stories and experiences of those who are marginalized] to refute myths that justify callousness and withdrawal. It also implies that we do all we can to help those habitually ignored or silenced to find their own voices and platforms . . .” (Loeb, 1999, p. 210). Telling people’s stories and hearing them tell their stories are forms of empathic efforts. Taking these ideas

and using them to answer research questions can provide a focused collaborative message that can be used to increase public perception and make needed changes. Furthermore, doing so on a community level can help those who are outsiders gain insight and understanding into the concerns of different people and can provide the impetus for social change.

Basic to the core of social work is a call for social action and change. Civic engagement is another way to promote social empathy, and as a dynamic process, social empathy promotes civic engagement. Civic engagement—typically identified as community service, volunteerism, and political involvement—is considered beneficial for several reasons. Engagement helps individuals develop, it creates community, it cultivates democratic virtues, and it protects public interests (Putnam, 1993). Civic engagement is promoted through two avenues: 1) learning how the political and social order is structured, and 2) the desire to work toward realizing an ideal of how things could be improved (Youniss & Yates, 1999). Social workers, from their positions in social service agencies, can promote volunteerism and community service—forms of civic engagement that can build social empathy.

Research reveals that social responsibility is in part the result of parents who model altruistic and caring behaviors. We can provide opportunities for children to care for others and provide ongoing support while children are engaged in community service (Pancer & Pratt, 1999). Exposing children to others who are different from themselves gives them an opportunity to practice affect sharing or mirroring and self/other-awareness while at the same time enhancing their awareness and understanding of different social conditions.

The development of social empathy can help us go beyond civic engagement. It is not enough to become involved civically; we need to engage with empathy and seek contextual understanding. This can potentially move us beyond civic engagement and service learning toward a commitment to social justice and action. Given that we know dominant groups are less likely to consider what life is like for those who are subordinate, it requires a concerted and sustained effort to promote social empathy. As social work-

ers, we are uniquely positioned to bring together different groups, illuminate others' experiences, and enhance familiarity. We stand at the crossroad between those who are marginalized and those who are in power, and we often are the only link between the two. To build social empathy, we need to develop that crossroad and enhance communication between groups.

One way to enhance social empathy is through a three-tiered approach, developing exposure, explanations, and experiences with groups who are different from our own. This formula is outlined in Box 1. At a minimum, we need to find ways for people from different groups—economic, political, social, racial, cultural, gender—to be exposed to each others' living situations. The simplest way is through witnessing and telling people's stories. Another powerful way is through visits and open dialogues. In academic settings, efforts are made through intergroup-relations groups. For example, students from different ethnicities, racial backgrounds, or genders come together to discuss their perspectives and share open dialogue.

This model can be brought to grade schools as well. We can bring back the school exchanges of decades ago where children visit different schools and learn about different neighborhoods and cultures. We can go into workplaces and bring together managers and front-line workers who typically never have personal contact. Many cities and towns choose "sister" cities all over the world to connect with and exchange visits. We can do the same thing across towns in our own counties and states. We can connect communities from urban to rural areas, from lower income to higher income, from one racial enclave to another. We can promote every opportunity to expose people to others who are different from themselves. These efforts can build proximity, similarity, and familiarity, the ingredients necessary for empathy.

Once we have promoted opportunities for cross-exposure, we can pursue opportunities for *explanation*. We can help people talk about their differences and what they mean and why they exist. We may eat different types of food, but we all eat. Breaking of bread is still breaking of bread, even if it is done with a pita, a tortilla, a bagel, a croissant, or a piece of toast.

*Experience* is the most impactful level. Social work education is built on experiential learning. We send students into agencies and settings that are often very different from their known milieus. We expect them to learn about others and their needs and life experiences. We can bring social work tradition into other parts of society by promoting social exchanges and volunteer projects in neighborhoods different from our own. The Settlement Movement was based on the assumption that to best serve people, workers needed to live amongst them and experience their lives day to day. We do that with study abroad programs, and we can do it in our own communities. Social workers are at the forefront of promoting lived and shared experiences with people from different groups.

Finally, social empathy can be promoted by evaluating these experiences and generating research that identifies which types of experiences are most effective. Empirical research needs to be completed to examine the linkage between individual empathy, contextual understanding, and social responsibility. From a macro-perspective, determination is needed as to whether there is indeed a strong correlation between social empathy and support for policies and programs. When this support for economic equality is clearly identified, access to health care and educational

opportunities can be developed with broad support.

### **IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

Taking into account the construct of social empathy as defined in this article can assist in providing the foundation for the actual measurement of social empathy. This measurement can start the process for development of valid and reliable data. An index of social empathy needs to include components of individual empathy (affect sharing, self/other-awareness, emotion regulation, and perspective taking) and the components of social empathy—measures of contextual understanding and social responsibility. With a measurement instrument, we can assess levels of social empathy before involving people in interventions, and then see if over time, we can increase those levels of social empathy.

Once the concept has been clearly defined as a construct, teaching social empathy is another area for future research. The model of developing exposure, explanation, and experience as outlined in Box 1 should be applied to different groups and assessed as to whether empathy, contextual understanding, and social responsibility increase. Furthermore, it may be

#### **BOX 1** ***Building Social Empathy***

Each level builds on the prior level and culminates with the strongest empathic experience:

**Level 1—Exposure**—Visit new places and people who are different from you.

Who is different from me?

How are they different?

How do we describe those differences?

**Level 2—Explanation**—Strive to understand why we are different.

What history, life events, culture, geography, ancestry contributed to our differences?

What is the impact of those differences today?

**Level 3—Experience**—Put yourself into the life of a person of a different class, sex, ability, age, sexual identity, race, or national origin.

What would your life be like if you were different?

What opportunities would you have or would you miss?

How would you be treated?

Based on Segal (2007b). Social empathy: A tool to address the contradiction of working but still poor. *Families in Society, The Journal of Contemporary Social Sciences*, 88, 333–337.

discovered that the concept of social empathy is not constant. So repeatedly, the connection between social empathy and social justice will need further investigation and possible readjustment. As social workers, we are well positioned to conduct research on both the individual aspects of empathy and the larger macro-applications of social empathy. Our professional commitment to social justice demands that we analyze and assess new methods that might promote social justice. Social empathy as a tool to enhance social justice therefore warrants our attention.

### **CONCLUSION—THE BENEFITS OF SOCIAL EMPATHY**

Empathy is a valuable tool for interpersonal relations. On a societal level, it can create deeper understanding of social inequities and move individual action to the promotion of social change. It can break the dominant/subordinate roles that keep people apart. It can enhance civic engagement. Social empathy can inform public policymaking to help create more just and compassionate social welfare policies and programs. And possibly most important of all, social empathy can keep us from falling into the trap of using misinformation and stereotypes as rationales for unjust social conditions, which will help to promote the best of humanity and ward off the worst. Refining the concept of social empathy into a more defined yet flexible construct will assist to ensure that subsequent research and practice efforts remain consistent to the needs of all served.

### **REFERENCES**

- Astin, A. W. (2000). The civic challenge of educating the underprepared student. In T. Ehrlich (Ed.), *Civic responsibility and higher education* (pp. 124–146). Phoenix, AZ: American Council on Education.
- Barker, R. L. (2003). *The social work dictionary*. Washington, DC: NASW Press.
- Batson, C. D. (1991). *The altruism question: Toward a social-psychological answer*. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Batson, C. D., Polycarpou, M. P., Harmon-Jones, E., Imhoff, H. J., Mitchener, E. C., Bednar, L. L., . . . Highberger, L. (1997). Empathy and attitudes: Can feeling for a member of a stigmatized group improve feelings toward the group? *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 72*(1), 105–118.
- Bell, A. V., Richerson, P. J., & McElreath, R. (2009). Culture rather than genes provides greater scope for the evolution of large-scale human prosociality. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, 106*, 17671–17674.
- Collins, P. H. (1990). *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment*. London, England: Harper Collins.
- Davis, M. H. (1996). *Empathy: A social psychological approach*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Decety, J., & Jackson, P. L. (2004). The functional architecture of human empathy. *Behavioral Cognitive Neuroscience Review, 3*(2), 71–100.
- Decety, J., & Jackson, P. L. (2006). A social-neuroscience perspective on empathy. *Current Directions in Psychological Science, 15*(2), 54–58.
- Decety, J., & Moriguchi, Y. (2007). The empathic brain and its dysfunction in psychiatric populations: Implications for intervention across different clinical conditions. *BioPsychoSocial Medicine, 1*, 22–43.
- DeNavas-Walt, C., Proctor, B. D., & Smith, J. C. (2010). *Income, poverty, and health insurance coverage in the United States: 2009*. Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau.
- DeTurk, S. (2001). Intercultural empathy: Myth, competency, or possibility for alliance building? *Communication Education, 50*, 374–384.
- de Waal, F. (2009). *The age of empathy: Nature's lessons for a kinder society*. New York, NY: Harmony Books.
- Einolf, C. J. (2008). Empathic concern and prosocial behaviors: A test of experimental results using survey data. *Social Science Research, 37*, 1267–1279.
- Eisenberg, N., Murphy, B. C., & Shepard, S. (1997). The development of empathic accuracy. In W. Ickes (Ed.), *Empathic accuracy* (pp. 73–116). New York, NY: The Guilford Press.
- Frank, R. H. (2001). Cooperation through emotional commitment. In R. M. Nesse (Ed.), *Evolution and the capacity for commitment* (pp. 57–76). New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Freedberg, S. (2007). Reexamining empathy: A relational-feminist point of view. *Social Work, 52*, 251–259.
- Freire, P. (1990). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York, NY: Continuum Publishing Company.
- Gerdes, K. E., & Segal, E. A. (2009). A social work model of empathy. *Advances in Social Work, 10*(2), 114–127.
- Gerdes, K. E., Segal, E. A., & Lietz, C. (2010). Conceptualising and measuring empathy: The need for clarity and consistency. *British Journal of Social Work, 40*, 2326–2343.
- Glick, P. (2002). Sacrificial lambs dressed in wolves' clothing: Envious prejudice, ideology, and the scapegoating

- of Jews. In L. S. Newman & R. Erber (Eds.), *Understanding genocide: The social psychology of the Holocaust* (pp. 113–142). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Glick, P. (2005). Choice of scapegoats. In J. F. Dovidio, P. Glick, & L. A. Rudman (Eds.), *On the nature of prejudice: 50 years after Allport* (pp. 244–261). Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.
- Glick, P. (2008). When neighbors blame neighbors: Scapegoating and the breakdown of ethnic relations. In V. M. Esses & R. A. Vernon (Eds.), *Explaining the breakdown of ethnic relations* (pp. 123–146). Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.
- Goleman, D. (1994). *Emotional intelligence*. New York, NY: Bantam Books.
- Hoffman, M. L. (2000). *Empathy and moral development: Implications for caring and justice*. London, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Iacoboni, M. (2008). *Mirroring people: The new science of how we connect with others*. New York, NY: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.
- Immordino-Yang, M. H., & Sylvan, L. (2010). Admiration for virtue: Neuroscientific perspectives on a motivating emotion. *Contemporary Educational Psychology, 35*, 110–115. doi:10.1016/j.cedpsych.2010.03.003
- Kaplan, J. T., & Iacoboni, M. (2006). Getting a grip on other minds: Mirror neurons, intention, understanding, and cognitive empathy. *Social Neuroscience, 1*(3/4), 175–183.
- Loeb, P. R. (1999). *Soul of a citizen: Living with conviction in a cynical time*. New York, NY: St. Martin's Press.
- Miller, J. B. (1992). Domination and subordination. In P. S. Rothenburg (Ed.), *The social construction of difference: Race, class, gender, and sexuality* (pp. 73–80). New York, NY: St. Martin's Press.
- Mills, N. (2006). Hurricane Katrina and Robert Kennedy. *Dissent Magazine, 53*(2), 5–6.
- Morrell, M. E. (2010). *Empathy and democracy: Feeling, thinking, and deliberation*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Pancer, S. M., & Pratt, M. W. (1999). Social and family determinants of community service involvement in Canadian youth. In M. Yates & J. Youniss (Eds.), *Roots of civic involvement: International perspectives on community service and activism in youth* (pp. 32–55). Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Putnam, R. D. (1993). *Making democracy work*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Rifkin, J. (2009). *The empathic civilization: The race to global consciousness in a world in crisis*. New York, NY: Penguin Books.
- Segal, E. A. (2006). Welfare as we *should* know it: Social empathy and welfare reform. In K. M. Kilty & E. A. Segal (Eds.), *The promise of welfare reform: Rhetoric or reality?* (pp. 265–274). Binghamton, NY: Haworth Press.
- Segal, E. A. (2007a). Social empathy: A new paradigm to address poverty. *Journal of Poverty: Innovations on Social, Political, & Economic Inequalities, 11*(3), 65–81.
- Segal, E. A. (2007b). Social empathy: A tool to address the contradiction of working but still poor. *Families in Society: The Journal of Contemporary Social Sciences, 88*, 333–337.
- Segal, E. A. (2008). Welfare reform: The need for social empathy. In I. Colby (Ed.), *Comprehensive handbook of social work and social welfare: Vol. 4. Social policy and social practice* (pp. 371–384). Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.
- Singer, T., & Lamm, C. (2009). The social neuroscience of empathy. *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences, 1156*, 81–96.
- Singer, T., & Steinbeis, N. (2009). Differential roles of fairness- and compassion-based motivations for cooperation, defection, and punishment. *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences, 1167*, 41–50.
- Stürmer, S., Snyder, M., & Omoto, A. M. (2005). Prosocial emotions and helping: The moderating role of group membership. *Journal of Personality & Social Psychology, 88*, 532–546.
- Swigonski, M. E. (1994). The logic of feminist standpoint theory for social work research. *Social Work, 39*, 387–393.
- Szalavitz, M., & Perry, B. D. (2010). *Born to love: Why empathy is essential and endangered*. New York, NY: William Morrow.
- U.S. Department of Justice. (2008). *Hate crime statistics, 2007*. Washington, DC: Author.
- Van Lange, P. A. M., Gallucci, M., Karremans, J. C., Klapwijk, A., & Folmer, C. R. (2007). A social interaction analysis of empathy and fairness. *Empathy and Fairness Novartis Foundation Symposium, 278*, 97–110.
- Wakefield, J. C. (1993). Is altruism part of human nature? Toward a theoretical foundation for the helping professions. *Social Service Review, 67*, 406–458.
- Youniss, J., & Yates, M. (1999). Introduction: International perspectives on the roots of civic identity. In M. Yates & J. Youniss (Eds.), *Roots of civic involvement: International perspectives on community service and activism in youth* (pp. 1–15). Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.