

Reflections from the Editorial Team: Empathy as Strength, and Celebrating Reflections' 30th Anniversary

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Abstract: In Volume 31(3) we begin by expressing our gratitude to the volunteers who make *Reflections* possible. We then focus on empathy as a strength that supports the narratives and creative expressions highlighted in this and every issue of the Journal. We highlight 10 articles in this Issue that reveal challenges encountered in engaging in the critical and creative thinking necessary to prepare and support helping professionals to navigate and negotiate their work and study across a variety of community, therapeutic, healthcare, and educational arenas.

Keywords: empathy, interdisciplinary, diversity, resilience

Welcome & Appreciation

We owe a special round of thanks to three of our previous Section Editors who are responsible for shepherding the articles in this Issue from submission and review into the process of copyediting and production. Our deepest appreciation goes to **Arlene Reilly-Sandoval** (Department of Social Work at Colorado State University Pueblo) for the Teaching and Learning Section; **Beth Lewis** (Graduate School of Social Work and Social Research at Bryn Mawr College) for the Practicum Education Section; and to **Crystal Coles-Quander** (James Bell Associates, Inc.) for the Research Section. While, as we noted in our last Issue, each of them has retired from their very, very long service to *Reflections*, as we can see from this Issue, the impact of their talents remains to the great benefit of us all!! Thank you and the reviewers listed at the end of this editorial for your dedication and commitment to the Journal.

We are excited to share that we are onboarding new volunteers who have joined us as Section Editors and whose names you will see as you submit new manuscripts. **Cathy McElderry** (newly retired from the Department of Social Work at Middle Tennessee State University) is our new Section Editor for Teaching and Learning. **Ahn Ngo** (School of Social Work at Wilfrid Laurier University) has joined Pat Gray (Silverman School of Social Work at Hunter College) as co-Editor of our Practice Section. **Brie Radis** (Department of Social Work at West Chester University) is our new Section Editor of the Practicum Education Section. Most recently, **Tiffany Baffour** (newly appointed Director of the School of Social Work at East Carolina University) and **Kenya Jones** (Clark Atlanta University) will serve as the new co-Editors of the Research Section—truly wonderful!!

We are delighted that Salem State University continues to be the publisher of *Reflections* under the able leadership of **Beth Massaro** (Associate Dean of the School of Social Work). As of July 1, 2025, our publisher has signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the *Special Commission to Advance Macro Social Work* to assume responsibility for the fiscal management of the Journal. This means that any donations made to *Reflections* will be directed to the Special Commission's website and that your contributions are still tax-deductible since the Special Commission is a nonprofit organization.

Our lead copyeditor **Jack Pincelli** (Pillbug Editorial) continues to amaze us with skill, attention to detail, and insight in working with authors to finalize their work. We are happy to have had **Keegan McGowan**, who stepped into the copyediting team this summer, and to report that Salem State University has hired **Kelsie Monheims** as the 2025–2026 Graduate Assistant to assist in copyediting this fall.

Reflections Editorial and Publishing Teams are so incredibly fortunate to have each and every one of these folks aboard, especially as we celebrate our 30th year!!

Empathy

In the spring of this year, national news outlets reported that a public figure had declared, “The fundamental weakness of Western civilization is empathy” (Wolf, 2025, para. 10) because empathy makes us more prone to manipulation. Given that empathy is one of the keywords in this Issue of the Journal, we have to ask: How much of the narrative is controlled by persons in power or the choices made by others? And, if there are powerful people who believe that empathy is a weakness, what does that say to the helping professions?

As some of you know, the word “empathy” did not appear in the English language until 1908; derived from the German term used to describe the emotional connection people felt with works of art or nature, the term was adopted by German and American psychologists to mean feeling one’s way into the experience of another (Lanzoni, 2018). In light of the original definition of empathy in which the aesthetics of nature or art move us to tears, we listen to music, hear the lyrics of favorite songs, appreciate the beauty of nature, photograph a flower, read a poem, hear a story, smile at a stranger, watch a movie, see images on the nightly news, or walk through a gallery. Getting in touch with our emotions and feelings can be a strength that can spur self-awareness, creativity, imagination, and curiosity—and put us in touch with our humanity (Maibom, 2020).

Imagine what would happen in the world if we had a pandemic of empathy. It has certainly been a popular topic from psychology to education, from neuroscience to philosophy, from literature to advertising. From the days when we put Vaseline on our glasses to simulate others’ blurred vision to today’s “age suits” complete with heavy helmets and “empathy bellies” for fathers-to-be, there are empathy boxes and empathy maps one can order online (Lanzoni, 2018, p. 4).

In *The AI Mirror*, Shannon Vallor (2024) writes that AI gives us the values of those humans who have historically had the power to shape the dominant patterns now engraved in our recorded data. To suggest that AI systems reflect humanity, Vallor argues, “is to write the lived experience of most people out of the human story” (p. 49). Vallor’s words reinforce our thinking as editors of *Reflections* that there are thousands of stories of empathy and connection that make us human and that have not been recorded. How much of our lived experience, of our interactions, relationships, and interpersonal encounters from which we learn about one another remain unshared, unspoken, or unwritten? Yet they define who we are, and they illustrate empathy in action as well as the ethics of care (Gilligan, 2023).

In building an empathic community, the organizational culture literature helps us understand the artifacts, values, and underlying assumptions in those groups and organizations in which our daily professional and personal lives are incubated (Berardi et al, 2020). Artifacts can be tangible—such as the beautiful photographs of centenarians and caregivers at the local agency on aging or home delivered meals to schoolchildren who without them would go hungry.

Yet, the primary artifacts of an empathic community are our human relationships—the ways in which we relate to one another, our behaviors, our interactions, even our body language and nonverbal cues. Our interactions aren't just passing artifacts; they are remembered by others, and we leave footprints along the way. We have incredible power in what we pay attention to and, just as importantly, in what we do not pay attention to.

As reviewed by Bailey and Tice in 2024, the book *Assessing Empathy*, written by Segal et al. (2017), deconstructs the physiological and cognitive aspects of individual, interpersonal, and social empathy. Their analysis led them to the development of validated instruments: the empathy assessment index (EAI) and the social empathy index (SEI).

Nonetheless, when we are working with an individual, organization, or community we must keep in mind that an assessment today is only an assessment today—that everyone has a unique story, and respecting the dignity and worth of the person means listening and responding to that story in context. When we are working with an organization to design and develop community-based programs we must recognize that an understanding of the needs of people in that community will drive the intervention and no two communities are exactly the same. To make change happen, we have to understand the system that we want to change. We have to embed empathy into the cultures of our systems of care and turn that empathy into compassion.

As we advocate for any policy, we must recognize that even though generalities may be made in order to address many needs, we are only pretending that everyone's needs are the same or similar. We sit at the crossroads of uncertainty and ambiguity, using our best judgment to navigate the roadways. We know that every choice, every change, every decision, every action is riddled with values and has implications for people's lives. And without empathy that motivates us to intervene, our actions (or lack of action) can become inhumane or unfeeling.

Empathy is the glue that holds the narratives and poems together in the issues published in *Reflections*. We offer a counter argument to all who accuse empathy of being a weakness—knowing that without empathy, we would relinquish our humanity.

Highlights of This Issue

In this issue we begin with two very thoughtful articles that focus on interdisciplinary ways of knowing. Matthew writes about environmental justice and features the artwork of her ten-year-old daughter P. L. M-M. (our cover artist!) whose empathy for trees and animal life is paired with the critical need for a trans-disciplinary perspective to rethink the future of our world. Calling readers to engage in eco-criticism, Matthew's narrative is ripe with a mother's

storytelling that unfolds into deeply philosophical questions about the future of people and the planet.

As broad as Matthew's article is on the world, Saks pulls us into the complexity of truth and subjectivity within the joining of human beings in clinical relationships. Raising questions about the assumptions of therapeutic relationship building, Saks digs deeply into the interdisciplinary literature in which a never-ending exploration of the joining process offers insights into the potential for creating new ways of re-imagining clinical practice.

Both narratives require our undivided attention as the experiences of these authors are framed within the insights of multiple disciplines and reveal the power and promise of empathy, connection, and growth individually and worldwide.

Our next three articles bring readers into the domain of healthcare settings as organizations that host a variety of helping professionals.

Robinson recounts experiences within a major hospital system in which the author managed an office of diversity, equity, and inclusion. Recognizing that Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders were experiencing high rates of hate and trauma, Robinson seized the opportunity to advocate for the inclusion of this population group within the hospital's scope of service.

Similarly, Cunningham writes about the experiences of African American and Latina women, including her own, within the medical system in the United States. Calling for research about perinatal care and advocating for preventive services to save black and brown birthing women, Cunningham brings incredible insight into what needs to happen in the name of birth equity and the provision of mental health services for women who need high-quality medical care.

Hamler's article reveals the author's experiences in an inpatient hospice unit in which confronting death and dying is exacerbated when hospice care, pain management, and communication is not culturally humble. Telling the story of a close family friend offers context for the author's advocacy for Black women and their families who struggle to access end-of-life care when systems are not built to honor the values and practices of racially minoritized groups.

All three articles reinforce the need for lifelong learning in which helping professionals continue to expand their knowledge about integrated healthcare, trauma-informed care, and the effects and history of racism and historical trauma.

The next three articles focus on the importance of self-care in educational and caregiving settings.

Livingston and six undergraduate social work students share their experiences in becoming part of an "unusual" sister circle in which they engaged in living out the concepts of cultural proficiency, self-awareness, and self-regulation in preparation for professional practice. They recommend how to use circle-like groups to minimize isolation and support resilience in the educational process.

Scott, Hogan, and Sabatini's narrative highlights the mental health challenges faced by college students as they navigate the vicissitudes of their educational journeys. Their interventions include the red folder campaign and class syllabi health and wellness resources that engage instructors in supporting the emotional health of their students.

Blackman joins the chorus in promoting self-help by using poetry to promote self-care. Blackman's poem is a testament to resilience when confronted with the emotional journey of providing care for a family member diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease.

All three articles are tributes to empathy, connection, and resiliency in narrative and poetic verse.

Our final two articles are written by helping professionals who share their community-based research experiences.

Baksh details the delicate balance and friction between the Muslim religion, child welfare organizations, and academic institutions, causing the author to continuously re-evaluate whether the voices of respondents will impact change in entrenched systems. Baksh grounds her narrative within the sociocultural context of being Muslim and the quest for translational research.

Davis recounts the process of attempting to recruit educators to share how they are equipped to support diverse elementary and secondary students, only to encounter barrier after barrier in gaining access to anyone willing to share their inclusion journeys. Both authors illustrate in words the complexity of navigating across educational, social, political, and religious institutions when they attempt to engage in research designed to ask hard questions.

The articles in this Issue reveal challenges encountered in engaging in the critical thinking necessary to prepare and support helping professionals to navigate and negotiate their work and study across arenas. We trust you will find this Issue as you find all of *Reflections*—full of compelling narratives that offer insights that will be useful to multiple professions, educators, practitioners, students, and others alike. Once again, we look forward to hearing from you!!

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With Gratitude...

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