

# The *wounded* social work student: A strength-based enquiry of personal loss experience and its impact on social work students' professional practice

Kathrin McInnerney and Sarah Wayland, University of New England, New South Wales

## ABSTRACT

**INTRODUCTION:** When working in the fields of loss, grief, bereavement and dying, the lived experience of the social work students, and their developing practice in the field, can be enhanced by awareness of the concept of the *wounded healer*.

**METHODS:** This study sought to explore the wounded healer concept amongst Australian social work students who had experienced the death of a loved one. The project was underpinned by a phenomenological approach seeking to understand personal loss experiences in professional practice skill development. Using semi-structured interviews, final-year social work students were asked to reflect on the positive and negative impacts of their personal loss experience on their emerging professional social work practice.

**FINDINGS:** An analysis of the data identified three main themes: (1) repeated triggers of loss and grief during field placement can occur; (2) students' ambiguity and confusion of safe inclusion of lived experience in a professional setting was identified; and (3) learning can be impacted by *wounded* reflections.

**CONCLUSION:** The study noted a lack of understanding among social work students on how to safely navigate their own *woundedness* and how to incorporate awareness into their professional practice skills. This may be addressed by responding to a current gap in the Australian social work curriculum. Future considerations for reflections on the effectiveness of field placement supervision and further guidance and education for wounded social work students at a university level may assist.

**KEYWORDS:** The wounded healer; loss and grief; social work curriculum; field placement supervision

AOTEAROA  
NEW ZEALAND SOCIAL  
WORK 34(3), 136–144.

**CORRESPONDENCE TO:**  
Kathrin McInnerney  
kathrin.malzner@yahoo.  
com.au

The conceptualisation of the project was developed through reflexive personal curiosity on how to use knowledge and insights from a personal loss experience in a social work practice skill development. Author one utilised their lived experience to position the study:

My mother died, quite unexpectedly, in 2019. Ever since then, I have spent a lot of time thinking about my change in perception to life and death. I now feel comfortable talking about death and dying. I do not shy away from friends and family that are grieving. I have been

able to see and accept the possibilities that can come with this loss. I have become more reflective about my own actions, more assertive with my desires, but at the same time more vulnerable and wounded. While I feel strong and wise some days, I feel weak and alone on others. My emotional growth over the past two years both personally and professionally, has been driven by my loss experience, which has forced me to re-evaluate my life and consequently encourage big life alterations. The loss that I have experienced has undeniably changed the course of my life and the essence of who I am. Moreover, the personal experience I had with the social worker who took me to see my mother at the morgue was the catalyst that drove me to further understand how my own experience can influence my practice framework. Her ability to comfortably be with me in the moment of the most painful minutes of my life, inspired me to do the same for others. Her silence, that said more than words could ever have; her comforting and safe presence; her ability to say only what was necessary for this very moment, are all attributes I aspire to achieve for my own social work practice.

### What is a *wounded* social work student?

The term *wounded healer* derives from ancient Greek mythology, conceptualised by Jung (1951, 1979), from the tale of Chiron who was enabled to heal others once he has been injured himself. Supiano and Vaughn-Cole (2011) identified that 80% of the participating social work students in their study had experienced the death of a loved one. Further research also identified that there were a significant number of social work students who have identified that their decision to choose social work as a profession, was due to their own lived experience (Gilin & Kauffman, 2015; Negrete, 2020; Thomas, 2016). Many students have experience of

significant life events, where they may have been emotionally *wounded*.

The current understanding of wounded healers is often affiliated with a reflexive recovery process. As a result of their professional education, a wounded healer should have the ability to reflect on their own experience, and understand its benefits and limitations which, in turn, allows for the possibility of being more empathetic and understanding of the client's situation (Zerubavel & Wright, 2012). Within the field of social work practice, awareness of the impact that vicarious trauma could have on the practitioner if their own conflicts and personal issues have not been resolved, is vital (Straussner et al., 2018). Vicarious trauma is defined by Kapoulitsas and Corcoran (2015) as the impact of hearing stories of trauma from others. Ho Chan and Tin (2012) highlight an increased risk for wounded social workers to experience vicarious trauma if they work in the field of death and dying. Zerubavel and Wright (2012) emphasise that therapists who have not recovered from their own emotional distress are more likely to be impacted by unwanted countertransference which can affect their rapport with clients, and consequently the client's recovery.

Newcomb et al. (2015) identified a gap when it comes to research in wounded healers as social workers, despite the evidence of high levels of *woundedness* among them. Therefore, the exploration of the wounded healer concept within a social work perspective could assist wounded practitioners to shape their professional practice skills.

### Methodology

The overarching research question that informed the study was: How are social work students who have experienced the death of a loved one incorporating their own experience of being wounded into their professional practice when working

in contexts of loss, grief, bereavement and dying?

The research was influenced by a strength-based enquiry, guided by hermeneutic phenomenology. Hermeneutic phenomenology is based within a qualitative approach to research and strives to understand how people make sense of their lived experiences (Liamputtong et al., 2016). This research approach considers that the researcher will inevitably make educated presuppositions when analysing the qualitative data gathered throughout the study (Harper et al., 2011). Hermeneutic phenomenology is used when the research endeavours to look at existential experiences of the participants that have had significant impact on their lives (Harper et al., 2011).

This study was developed with a strengths perspective in mind, which emphasises a person's abilities over their deficits (Payne, 2021). This meant that the researcher set out to explore the strengths that can come from the loss of a loved one, rather than contemplating the challenges one had after the loss. Tsey (2019) argued that a strength-based approach does not disregard that people face challenges but strives to explore what can enable them to keep going despite the challenges. Therefore, the interview protocol was developed from an analysis of the literature that explored the beneficial attributes of wounded healers in practice and was also guided by the reflective recovery process of wounded healers. The protocol guided the interviews to shed light on the growth and professional capability that can come from being wounded and emphasise the healer aspect of the wounded healer concept.

Eight semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with Bachelor and Master of Social Work students at a regional Australian University. The inclusion criteria for participants included three requirements: 1) that the participants had all experienced the loss of a loved one more than 12 months

ago; 2) were in the last year of their degree, to ensure they had completed a field placement; and 3) that students have an interest in working in or have worked in the field of loss, grief, bereavement and dying post-qualifying.

### Data analysis

Data analysis of the interviews was guided by the six stages of phenomenological data analysis, which enables reflective thinking about each interview and the formulation of themes and meanings (Liamputtong et al., 2016). The first two stages of analysis required the researcher to carefully read the transcripts while applying a reflective lens to identify first themes and thoughts (Liamputtong et al., 2016). Stages three and four concentrated on the formulation and meaning of the different themes that emerge, and finally narrowing those themes down (Liamputtong et al., 2016). Lastly, stages five and six constituted of another revision of the narrowed-down themes, a discussion and reflection of the themes with a third party, and finally a detailed description of the themes (Liamputtong et al., 2016). The reflection and meaning-making of the narrowed-down themes continued throughout the write-up of this thesis.

### Ethics

This project had been approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the University of New England (Approval No HE21-009).

Hughes (2015) argued that research that includes topics of loss and grief is ethically challenging due to the emotional nature of its context. However, this study did not require the participants to talk about their loss experience. Rather, it asked them to answer an exploratory interview protocol during an in-depth interview in relation to the change in their professional practice framework after the bereavement occurred. Further, the questions were guided by a strengths-based

perspective, meaning that they looked at the growth that comes from a loss.

The recruitment material used clearly outlined any potential emotional harm that may affect the participants to ensure clear consent to proceed. Furthermore, the recruitment material provided the participants with the contact information for support services.

Prior to the interview, the researcher provided the participants with consent forms, which were discussed verbally and returned with the signature of the participant. Between 48–72 hours after the interview, the researcher emailed the participant to check in, and once again provide the contact details for CAPS and Lifeline.

All participant quotes have been assigned a pseudonym to ensure confidentiality.

## Findings

The thematic analysis of the interview data identified three major themes across participants.

### Triggers during field placement

Five participants stated that they were exposed to loss, grief, and bereavement at least once during their first field education placement. The most common experience for the participants was to offer bereavement support to clients. Only one participant, who undertook her first field placement in the context of a hospital, was exposed to death and dying. While some experiences within this context were positive for the participant and encouraged them to further reflect on how their own experience had shaped professional practice, there were also experiences that still appeared to be unresolved within the participant.

... that was a really hard one. I kind of felt that when they left. I really, it was quite emotional. ... I would often

question ... how they were going, how they were coping? ... So that was, it was it was a challenge, I guess, to be learning on placement, and to be exposed to that situation. (Jane)

### Ambiguity of inclusion of lived experience in professional setting

Eight participants agreed that their own woundedness provided them with greater capacity to respond to their grieving or dying clients.

... it's good to have experience with that, because it helps you to be more empathetic to what others are going through. (Sam)

Seven participants agreed that having had that lived experience of losing a loved one can enable a deeper level of understanding towards the grieving client. Being able to have that deeper level of understanding can enable the social work student to better support their grieving clients. One participant reflects on their practice before and after their loss experience.

... I still managed to connect with that person and work with that person. But I feel like if I had had that death earlier, I could probably understand that that anger that she felt, that she couldn't quite place. ... I probably would have just had a deeper understanding for it ... I think had I gone through my own loss. It probably would have been a bit different for me to just, yeah, understand how difficult it was for them. (Jamie)

Seven participants stated that their own grief provided them with the platform to understand every person grieves differently and that this will enable them to show unconditional positive regard to their grieving clients.

I think that I was really able to just be genuine ... I think it was really

natural for me to sort of address her grief in a really natural way, you know, acknowledge that, you know, whatever she was doing, or feeling was like completely normal . . . just assure her she wasn't going crazy. (Sue)

While this research identified that participants believed that their personal experience with death can be a helpful tool when working in the context of loss, grief, bereavement and dying, there is also ambiguity and confusion surrounding the practical use of the lived experience in a practice setting.

Yeah, I just, every all of our experiences create who you are as a practitioner. But just how you do it, like I don't know, maybe you use it [the personal experience] as a starting point. (Sue)

There was noticeable interest and simultaneous uncertainty of self-disclosure among participants. Some participants believed increased awareness of when or if they disclose was vital for their practice framework.

[Self disclosure is a] a big question for me. Through my whole social work studies is that line of self-disclosure . . . I feel like there is some level of self-disclosure that could be of benefit . . . I actually have felt that through the course subject that it has been more of a negative concept to self-disclose that. And that's why I've struggled with the concept through the whole studies, because I've felt, yeah, that there are benefits to self-disclosure. (Jane)

I remember hearing someone . . . like one of the lecturers . . . saying how, like, there were times when I wanted to just, you know cry, but they had to hold it together till they were like, in private. But, like I think it's like honesty . . . But there is nothing wrong with showing a bit of vulnerability as a professional in front of your client. (Sam)

## Wounded reflections

Throughout their studies, participants stated that they learnt about the importance of reflective practice and having awareness of how they have an impact on clients but also how clients might impact on them. Additionally, the death of a loved one could also be a catalyst for reflection and provide a foundation for personal and professional growth.

So, awareness in that sense of knowing how your grief and loss affects you and how you react to things like that is really helpful moving forward in a professional setting as well. (Abbie)

I guess that that sort of has occurred since losing my mum, and I guess I am looking back on it, yeah, I guess, yeah, possibly the way that I have changed? . . . The way it's changed me as a person, the way it's changed my thoughts about life and how I use that to go forward. (Jane)

In line with the concept of the wounded healer, participants noted that they needed to be reflective about their own experience, but also participate in an active recovery process of their own grief. The active recovery process of their own grief can enable the social work student to draw strength and competence from their experience into their practice.

I believe you would, if you have processed your own grief, you will be able to support probably better than those who didn't have the lived experience . . . during lots of times I think I tried to say what I wanted to hear . . . [This] made me realise I was working on my own grief. (Lena)

Participants reflected concerns about any accidental and unwanted countertransference or triggers when working with clients who are dying or grieving. Six participants spoke of their own "unhealed" wounds possibly

being opened up when working with clients who are dying or grieving.

And also that I don't take it on personally, that I don't start, yeah, seeing like someone, someone's passed away and putting my friends death on that or like treating it the same way. That would be my worries at the moment. (Jamie)

## Discussion

This is the first Australian study that explored the wounded healer concept among Australian social work students. The participants of this study all confirmed that their personal experience with the death of a loved one impacted on their professional practice approach. The study revealed that the participants' own loss experiences influenced their interest in working in loss, grief, bereavement and dying. This is congruent with other international studies, which discovered that a high percentage of social work students were influenced by their own adverse life experience when it came to studying social work (Gilin & Kauffman, 2015; Negrete, 2020; Thomas, 2016).

### Acknowledging that the personal self can impact the professional self

Wounded social work students will eventually enter the professional workforce as wounded social workers. More so, students' adverse life experience which, in the case of this particular study, is the death of a loved one, is the force that drove the decision to become a social worker in the first place. The participants hope to transform their own woundedness into a professional healing tool for others' needs to be valued.

The social work curriculum teaches different theories of grief and, while those acknowledge the complexity and nuances within different grief responses, it may not be until the students experience it

themselves that they fully understand the totality of grief. This study showed a common consensus that a social worker, who walked the same path as the client, may have a more nuanced understanding of the client's situation. Wallace et al. (2019) asserted that "real-life exposure, self-disclosure, and emotional guidance are all supported strategies for providing an impactful educational experience preparing professionals for work with dying and grieving clients" (p. 54). Their own encounter with grief provided them with an insider perspective of its physical and emotional impact on life. Therefore, their own wounds enabled them to be compassionate and empathetic due to the insight that grief does not have rules, but is indeed often irrational, different from person to person and there is no clear end.

### From wounded social work student to wounded healer

The findings of this study indicate that wounded students are actively thinking and often talking to peers about how their personal experience, or woundedness, and how this can affect their professional social work practice. However, awareness of the term wounded healer is limited, which emphasises the active recovery process of the professional practitioner in order to transition from wounded to wounded healer. There was attention paid to the importance of self-awareness and reflection of the participant's own grief, but this was expressed in relation to the individual's responsibility and internal self-reflection, not as part of an active process. This process would need to entail more than one's private internal reflections and be indeed active in its nature, meaning that it should for example be done during clinical supervision (St. Arnaud, 2017). Supervision has been highlighted as a vital tool for wounded healers to reflect on their woundedness and ensure safe practice with clients (St. Arnaud, 2017). Although not mentioned with a clear concept of how to actively engage in

reflection that enables and supports active recovery, most participants did consider self-reflection and reflective practice when working with clients who are dying or grieving as a vital core skill for wounded students.

### **The importance of field placement supervision for the healing narrative**

Participants in this study identified that reflection is key to understanding how one's woundedness impacts on professional practice framework. However, there was confusion among the participants when asked how they would practically incorporate those reflections into their practice.

There is a strong emphasis on students' ability to develop their own practice framework during their field placement by engaging in reflective supervision and reflective journaling (Australian Association of Social Workers [AASW], 2021). Yet, only one participant named supervision as a vital tool in their healing process. This indicates that supervision during field placement may not be the place for most students to actively engage in their recovery process and reflection on how their woundedness impacts on their professional practice skills.

The AASW (2012) stated that field education supervisors need to have two years' professional social work experience and be eligible to be registered with the AASW. There are no other prerequisites or mandatory courses that potential field education supervisors need to attend. An international study found that, while there is strong reliance on field supervisors to provide professional support and growth to students on their field placements, there is also a lack of organisational support as well as misunderstandings of what field placement supervisors are responsible for when it comes to the student's learning (Cleak et al., 2016). If social work students' knowledge about the wounded healer

concept is limited, the chances are that the field education supervisors may not be aware of this concept.

This study has uncovered limited support and understanding of active recovery and reflection on one's woundedness among participants. The findings suggest that wounded social work students need more support and guidance throughout their study when it comes to active reflection.

### **Promoting wounded healers at a university level**

Straussner et al. (2018) argued that, despite a high level of wounded social workers (and therefore the potential for wounded healers), there is no common theoretical framework used in social work. Yet, Zerubavel and Wright (2012) have originated a wounded healer practice framework for psychotherapists. Including their own experience in their professional practice skill development is often considered inevitable and important for psychotherapists and social workers (Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2021; Linden, 2019).

Conversely, the participants of this study expressed concern about bringing "the self" into their professional practice as social workers. This contrasts with the study's findings that indicated that the participant's own wounds were the reason for becoming social workers. The study found that participants believed that the current social work curriculum discourages this or at least does not provide the guidance needed for students to understand appropriate ways of including oneself. Participants were worried that bringing too much of themselves into the work with dying or grieving clients would open their own unhealed wounds and consequently trigger and re-traumatise them.

### **Implications for practice**

To ensure the incorporation of awareness of the wounded healer concept into the

social work curriculum, to assist wounded social work students' needs to gain better understanding of how their woundedness impacts their practice. This research highlighted the need for further awareness of the lived experience of wounded social work students. The study highlighted how confusion and ambiguity surrounding the safe inclusion of their woundedness into their practice approach when working within the context of loss, grief, bereavement and dying, was required. This shows a need for a more in-depth study around the guidance and perception of wounded social work students at a university level and gain further insight on the gaps of the current social work curriculum. There is a need to assist social work students with a theoretical framework on how to safely navigate through their own woundedness and how to incorporate this as a strength into their professional practice framework (Fox & Wayland, 2020).

This study revealed that loss, grief and bereavement may be common factors faced by the wounded social work students during field placement. Previous research has shown that supervision can be a vital tool during one's active recovery process as a wounded healer (Zuchowski, 2016). However, studies have also highlighted the lack of guidance and structure when it comes to field placement supervision. Hence, there is an urgent need for further research into field placement supervision, specifically in the realm of wounded social work students.

### Limitations

This study was limited by a small sample size and its focus is as an exploratory study only. The participants were recruited from one regional Australian University, meaning that insights cannot be generalised.

This study was also limited by one time interaction, limiting further clarification during the thematic analysis to gain further insight into some of the discoveries.

It should be noted that this study did not specifically ask students about the guidance they receive from university, or their supervision experience, but rather the analytical part of this study made presuppositions according to the information they received from the students around their professional practice.

Submitted: 4 May 2022

Accepted: 9 July 2022

Published: 23 September 2022

### References

- Australian Association of Social Workers. (2012). *Australian social work education and accreditation standards* (ASWEAS). <https://www.aasw.asn.au/document/item/3550> Australian Association of Social Workers. (2021). *ASWEAS field education standards*. <https://www.aasw.asn.au/document/item/13188>
- Chenoweth, L., & McAuliffe, D. (2021). *The road to social work and human service practice with student resource*. Cengage Australia.
- Cleak, H., Roulston, A., & Vreugdenhil, A. (2016). The inside story: A survey of social work students' supervision and learning opportunities on placement. *British Journal of Social Work*. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcv117>
- Gilin, B., & Kauffman, S. (2015). Strategies for teaching about trauma to graduate social work students. *Journal of Teaching in Social Work*, 35(4), 378–396. <https://doi-org.ezproxy.une.edu.au/10.1080/08841233.2015.1065945>
- Harper, D., Thompson, A. R., & Harper, S. (2011). *Qualitative research methods in mental health and psychotherapy* (1st ed.). Wiley.
- Ho Chan, W. C., & Tin, A. F. (2012). Beyond knowledge and skills: Self-competence in working with death, dying, and bereavement. *Death Studies*, 36(10), 899–913. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07481187.2011.604465>
- Hughes, M. E. (2015). A strengths perspective on caregiving at the end-of-life. *Australian Social Work*, 68(2), 156–168. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0312407X.2014.910677>
- Jung, C. G. (1951, 1979). *Aion: Researches into the phenomenology of the self* (1st ed.). Princeton University Press.
- Kapoulitsas, M., & Corcoran, T. (2015). Compassion fatigue and resilience: A qualitative analysis of social work practice. *Qualitative Social Work*, 14(1), 86–101. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1473325014528526>
- Fox, M., & Wayland, S. (2020). When you become the lived experience: The journey backwards from academia. *Aotearoa New Zealand Social Work*, 32(2). <https://doi.org/10.11157/anzswj-vol32iss2id739>.
- Liamputtong, P., Anderson, K., & Bondas, T. (2016). *Research methods in health: Foundations for evidence-based practice* (3rd ed.). Oxford University Press.



- Linden, M. (2019). Supervision in der Aus- und Weiterbildung von Psychotherapeuten [Supervision in psychotherapy training of psychologists and physicians]. *Psychotherapeut*, 64(4), 302. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00278-019-0361-1>
- Negrete, M. (2020). Adverse childhood experiences of social work students and implications for field specialization and practice. *Electronic Theses, Projects, and Dissertations*. 1033. <https://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/etd/1033>
- Newcomb, M., Burton, J., Edwards, N., & Hazelwood, Z. (2015). How Jung's concept of the wounded healer can guide learning and teaching in social work and human services. *Advances in Social Work and Welfare Education*, 17(2), 55–69.
- Payne, M. (2021). *Modern social work theory* (5th ed.). Macmillan International Higher Education.
- Straussner, S. L. A., Senreich, E., & Steen, J. T. (2018). Wounded healers: A multistate study of licensed social workers' behavioral health problems. *Social Work*, 63(2), 125–133. <https://doi.org/10.1093/sw/swy012>
- St. Arnaud, K. O. (2017). Rencontre du guerisseurblesse: Demarche parallele et supervision [Encountering the wounded healer: Parallel process and supervision]. *Canadian Journal of Counselling and Psychotherapy*, 51(2), 131–144.
- Supiano, K. P., & Vaughn-Cole, B. (2011). The impact of personal loss on the experience of health professions: Graduate students in end-of-life and bereavement care. *Death Studies*, 35(1), 73–89. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07481187.2010.507321>
- Thomas, J. T. (2016). Adverse childhood experiences among MSW students. *Journal of Teaching in Social Work*, 36(3), 235–255. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08841233.2016.1182609>
- Tsey, K. (2019). *Working on wicked problems: A strengths-based approach to research engagement and impact*. Springer International Publishing AG.
- Wallace, C. L., Cohen, H. L., & Jenkins, D. A. (2019). Transforming students' attitudes and anxieties toward death and loss: The role of prior death experiences. *Omega, Journal of Death and Dying*, 79(1), 52–71. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0030222817710140>
- Zerubavel, N., & Wright, M. O. (2012, Dec). The dilemma of the wounded healer. *Psychotherapy*, 49(4), 482–491. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0027824>
- Zuchowski, I. (2016). Getting to know the context: The complexities of providing off-site supervision in social work practice learning. *The British Journal of Social Work*, 46(2), 409–426. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcu13>