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Student Psychotherapists' Experiences of Self-Empathy: An Interpretative Poetic Inquiry

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ABSTRACT

Background: Interpersonal empathy is a well-researched concept in the counselling and psychotherapy literature, although less is known about how it is experienced at an intrapersonal level. What is known is that self-empathy involves a change in perspective and a re-evaluation of events, in kinder and less judgemental ways.

Aim: The aim of this study was to understand and appreciate the meaning of self-empathy to trainee creative psychotherapists. The research was in the context of the students' own self-care and intrapersonal relating.

Methodology and Methods: An interpretative poetic inquiry design was utilised. Interviews were conducted with 4 trainee creative psychotherapists at a university in the Northwest of England, UK.

Results: Self-empathy was experienced as a process, often involving several aspects of the self, to understand and accept feelings and events in the context of self-care. Development of self-empathy involved internal dialoguing through activities such as journaling, poetry writing, meditation, and being outdoors. The use of interpretative poetic inquiry enabled the emotional aspects of the data to be distilled and combined reflexively with the experiences of the researchers.

Conclusions: This research provides contemporary insights into the experiences of self-empathy from the perspective of a small number of trainee creative psychotherapists. It has implications for students in terms of self-understanding and self-care, and for educators, to inform future psychotherapist preparation and curriculum development. Finally, there are implications for future research using interpretative poetic inquiry as a reflexive approach, which embraces the presence of the researcher in the research.

1 | Introduction

The aim of this research is to understand the meaning of self-empathy as it is lived by student psychotherapists. This is explored in the context of students' self-care and intrapersonal relating and could reveal insights that are helpful to their educational preparation. The approach to the research combines hermeneutic phenomenology with poetic inquiry to uncover the qualitative, embodied experience of self-empathy to

the students. The work begins with an exploration of what is already known about self-empathy in the context of psychotherapist well-being. Using poetic inquiry supports both the investigation and communication of this experience in a particular and immediate way and enables the researchers to develop a more textured exploration than if using interview excerpts alone. Finally, conclusions are drawn about the meaning of self-empathy and how educators might consider this concept as part of psychotherapist preparation.

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Summary

- Implications for practice and policy
 - Being able to experience self-empathy during psychotherapy training has the potential to support student health and well-being and reduce emotional distress.
 - Creative approaches, such as poetry writing, expressive arts, and meditation, could offer inner space and more opportunities for self-dialoguing and self-talk to facilitate the development of self-empathy and self-care amongst student psychotherapists.
 - Self-empathy could be important for practitioner growth, as it involves elements of self-compassion, self-acceptance, and a deep, felt sense of kindness and love.
 - Further research is needed into the ways self-empathy could be incorporated in psychotherapy training programmes, as the participants perceived self-empathy as a pre-requisite to self-compassion, acceptance, and the ability to empathise with others.

2 | Background

Empathy is important for individuals and relationships, and in daily life, it is linked to increased well-being (Depow et al. 2021). In a healthcare setting, empathy has a positive impact on both physiological and psychological outcomes when experienced by users of services (Ward et al. 2012). In a psychotherapy context, Rogers (1980, 142) suggested empathy involves the therapist ‘... entering the private perceptual world of the other...’ and it has been shown to be the best predictor of a positive therapeutic outcome (Elliot et al. 2018). Rogers promoted a more egalitarian relationship in therapy by replacing diagnosis and assessment with empathic understanding (Freire 2022). Empathy is one of the core conditions of client centred therapy and enables a person to listen to themselves more clearly, leading to greater understanding of their own experience (Rogers 1980). When viewed in this way, therapists’ empathy leads to the client developing their own self-empathy, leading to an altered self-concept (Rogers 1980). Rogers (1980) clearly placed importance on self-empathy as an integral part of client growth, although there is little research on the concept in the psychotherapy setting.

Barrett-Lennard (1997, 108) described self-empathy as a ‘respectful inner listening’ accompanied by a readiness to hear internally arising signals. Self-empathy can lead to self-growth through a process of self-acceptance, and closer intrapersonal listening, which subsequently leads to change in the person (Bohart and Greenberg 1997). Self-empathy enables self-openness and Jordan (1991) described this process as corrective, in that previously judged or disowned aspects of self can be open to a more caring self-acceptance. Sherman (2014, 230) explored self-empathy as enabling a ‘fairer self-assessment’, which subsequently requires a change in perspective. Chiu et al. (2020) suggested self-empathy starts with a reconsideration of the objectified and undesired self-aspect, which is then followed by perspective shifting and looking at things in a different way. This process begins as a cognitive one but then enables access to current feelings.

Sherman (2014) described self-empathy as incorporating elements of compassion, and Chiu et al. (2020) linked self-compassion with perspective shifting, something important when feeling emotions self-empathically. Neff (2003) regarded self-compassion as comprising three elements: self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness, and agreed there were similarities with self-empathy. However, Neff (2003) viewed self-empathy as being reliant on a therapy experience, developed through interpersonal contact. In contrast, self-compassion can be developed in other ways, such as mindfulness exercises, without the need for personal therapy. The experience of self-empathy for the students, and whether it incorporates elements of self-compassion, is another question that could be addressed in this research, given the potential similarities.

2.1 | Psychotherapist Well-being

An exploration of therapist self-empathy could be beneficial in the context of self-care. This is an important consideration since the demand for psychotherapists to show empathy to others is high and this can increase the risk of burnout (Simionato and Simpson 2018). Shifts in perspective, supported by self-empathy, could enable self-kindness, a non-judgemental attitude, and further openness to the self, which could support therapist psychological well-being. Simionato and Simpson (2018) found moderate to high symptoms of burnout amongst 55% of psychotherapists and mental health professionals. Indeed, 18.3%–39.9% of psychotherapists and clinical psychologists reported elevated levels of emotional exhaustion, a defining feature of burnout, and 11%–26.3% showed low or moderate levels of depersonalisation, a state characterised by a distancing and cynical attitude towards clients.

Exploring psychotherapist well-being, Van Hoy and Rzeszutek (2022) suggested self-care behaviours, such as self-compassion and mindfulness practices, could contribute to the maintenance of a high quality of life. Further, positive links between self-compassion and well-being have been found in final-year psychotherapy students (Beaumont et al. 2016). Students who scored highly on self-compassion measures experienced improved well-being and lower compassion fatigue and burnout. There was a significant relationship between self-kindness and increased well-being, and self-judgement was related to an increase in compassion fatigue. This has implications for the current study since self-empathy concerns a more caring and less judgemental attitude towards the self (Jordan 1991; Sherman 2014). The ability to adopt a self-kind attitude is important for psychotherapists in relation to burnout. Burnout is experienced as an entrenched feeling of inadequacy, shame, and self-criticism. This can inform a self-critical inner dialogue, which has subsequent effects on self-esteem, self-worth, and can lead to a withdrawal from others (Finan et al. 2021).

Considering protective factors, years of experience in the psychotherapy profession have been shown to influence positive mental well-being (Summers et al. 2021). The underlying mechanism for this remains unclear; for example, it is unknown whether the protective effects of increased experience are due to skills enhancement, confidence, better emotion regulation, or a more adequate balance between empathy and sympathy

(Laverdiere et al. 2018). Whatever the reason, the link between lack of experience and negative well-being is important when considering student psychotherapists who are early in their careers and have fewer protective factors. If self-empathy, like self-compassion, could support well-being amongst psychotherapists, it is a fruitful area for research. Further, although the terms might be used synonymously, there might be differences between how self-empathy and self-compassion are experienced, making this exploration an important one.

3 | Methods

The overarching aim of this research is to understand the experience and meaning of self-empathy to student psychotherapists in the context of their own self-care and intrapersonal relating during their educational preparation. Hermeneutic phenomenology enables exploration of experience as it is lived by the participants, moving beyond description to uncover meaning and associated context (Dibley et al. 2020), and was therefore chosen as the most appropriate approach. As Smythe et al. (2008, 1390) suggest, this style of research is more of a 'journey of thinking' rather than an attempt to determine absolute truths. Thinking is more of a felt experience, informed by what has been previously experienced in our lives, whether this is an unconscious act or explicitly known to us (Smythe et al. 2008). For example, one researcher (KJ) has experience of self-empathy, which is informed by her past career as a nurse and her more recent practice as a creative psychotherapy student. SA is currently an academic in creative arts therapies. Their past experiences of self-empathy will have an influence on the interpretation of the data and need to be clear to enable the 'bridging' of the distance between the two to occur (Gadamer 1976, 95). Reflexive discussions were held between the researchers to enable awareness of our own views throughout the project. The first author (KJ) undertook data collection, and her pre-understandings were made evident not only through her reflections throughout this project but also through her questioning and responses during the interviews. The second author (SA) creatively explored her stance on self-empathy and oversaw the project with a view that the processes involved in experiencing self-empathy are different from self-compassion and self-acceptance.

Using in-depth exploratory interviews enabled the meaning of the experience of self-empathy to be revealed to both the participants and the researcher. Hermeneutic interviews enable a sense-making of the experience in which both sides co-create different meanings, revealed through the dialogue (Dibley et al. 2020). As different insights emerge, they become the foundation for poetry, which incorporates both researcher and participant voice in the development of further and more textured understandings (Galvin and Todres 2009). Further, when interview data is developed into poetry, emotional aspects are heightened, and readers are invited to construct a more feelings-based interpretation for themselves. As suggested by Glesne (1997, 218), using experimental forms such as poetry '... releases a rare feeling of reflective play in interpretation and language'. The reader not only joins in on a critical level, but also at an emotional and personally reflective one through the transformative nature of poetic form.

Ethical approval was obtained from Edge Hill University Research Ethics Sub-Committee (Approval number: FOHS 395). Participants were recruited through an advertisement, which was shared twice on an organisational e-learning platform during September 2023. Each potential participant was sent the consent form and information sheet via email. Of seven students showing interest in the study via email, four agreed to be interviewed. All participants were students in the MSc Counselling and Psychotherapy: Contemporary Creative Approaches, Edge Hill University, United Kingdom (UK), and were about to commence the second year of their study. The age range was 24–45 years. Three participants identified as female and one as male. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were undertaken with all participants and audio recorded using Microsoft Teams during October 2023, with interviews lasting between 35 and 70 min.

3.1 | Data Analysis

The first author (KJ) entered the interview process with a stance of 'being present', with a sensitivity to the words, non-verbal communication, and wider context of the participant's situation (Galvin and Todres 2009). As KJ was a peer student, studying on the same psychotherapy programme as the participants, she entered the interviews already with some contextual knowing and feeling about self-empathy. However, poetic inquiry supports researchers to move beyond their initial understanding, into a felt sense of the meaning of the accounts. Van Luyn et al. (2016, 83) state the use of poetry in qualitative research has an ability to 'distil emotion' in a way that can amplify the participant's lived experience. Indeed, when data is condensed into poetic form, it leads to a more powerful presentation and can convey intense emotion, which might be lost in a longer narrative presentation (Langer and Furman 2004). Poetic inquiry is described by Faulkner (2017, 210) as '...the use of poetry crafted from research endeavours...' to be used, '...as/in/for inquiry' and is an approach that can support data analysis (Faulkner 2020). It is an approach that articulates well with hermeneutic phenomenology, as it enables the creation of language capable of revealing the nuanced nature of experience (Green et al. 2021).

The first author (KJ) reflected on each case individually to begin the poetic interpretations of self-empathy. The second author (SA) interpreted the data using creative responses to develop the interpretation non-verbally. SA expanded the poetic inquiry, by deepening sensory and emotional dimensions through colour and texture. This enabled expression beyond the boundaries of language and brought the symbols, themes, and metaphors within the poems to life through a form of visual poetry (Leavy 2019).

The choice of data, included verbatim within each poem, was combined with the authors' own interpretation and then further informed by the wider dataset. This process provided examples of the back-and-forth motion that takes place, from the parts of the transcript to the whole of the dataset and back again, viewed through a creative interpretative lens. Using an individual case approach to data analysis has the potential to produce more

powerful information and is achievable with smaller sample sizes (Malterud et al. 2016).

4 | Results

Overall, the data showed all participants as having experiences of self-empathy, although some did not seem to cognitively recognise it, despite identifying it as a felt sense. There were some similarities in the data, which will be acknowledged, although each participant had a unique aspect to their self-empathy experience. Each narrative begins with a line which enables the reader to see what KJ considered to be the prominent idea in each case. This prominent idea was further distilled as she developed the poetry, and the interpretative process continued in a cycle of 'whole-parts-different whole' of understanding. Similarly, SA used colours, shapes and textured fabric to explore the felt sense of the meaning of the words in the interview. The interpretation of the interview evolved predominantly with warm and bright colours. This was further developed through continuous reflexive exploration, which involved both researchers interpreting, questioning, and analysing the data until consensus was reached, in a style like the team approach by Diekelmann and Ironside (2011). Pseudonyms were chosen by the researchers and have been used to present the data anonymously.

4.1 | Participant 1, Sonya: 'I Just Need to Take a Few Deep Breaths, Forgive Myself, Feel Love for Myself, Know That I'm Doing My Best'

All interviews began with a broad opening question, designed to support exploration of the concept of self-empathy and how it was experienced. Sonya began by discussing the interpersonal aspects of empathy, although she was open to considering it as a self-directed process:

K: Can you tell me about self-empathy and what it might mean to you?

S: I find it an interesting term, because empathy, I immediately think of empathy as you empathise with another... it is not often we examine ourselves. We sort of self-reflect and study our own behaviours and the way that we deal with things, so that can be empathic. So yeah, I think that's what self-empathy means. I consider myself quite an empathic person. I think I am an empath to others quite naturally, but it's interesting to think I might be that to myself.

Sonya described how showing empathy to others might come at an emotional cost, a statement which led to empathy from KJ to Sonya during the interview, as the discussion of self-neglect developed:

S: I think I find because I'm naturally empathic towards others, I think that puts me at a risk of not being empathic to myself because I'm such a giver and very in tune with others and I know I neglect myself sometimes.

Sonya described her interest in the difference between self-care, self-compassion, and empathy, and the link was explored between the three concepts:

S: I think they must be linked... because you need to empathise with yourself to then know that you need the compassion ... sort of trying to work out why I behave in a particular way then helps me. Then I think OK, I just need to take a few deep breaths, forgive myself, feel love for myself, know that I'm doing my best. I am enough... and then find the patience again ... then I can show compassion and grace.

When considering where the empathy originated from, Sonya suggested it arises through self-love. Compassion was viewed as an active state, which was later described as self-care activities, whereas empathy was a more silent state but acted as the foundation for the compassionate activities:

S: ... I think it comes from love. I think empathy comes from love. Definitely. I think when you are loving person, love to me is a verb, it's a doing word, love is giving, it's sacrificial and it's completely putting yourself in that other person's shoes and showing love. That to me, is empathy. I think the compassion is more of an action, whereas you can empathise with somebody and not act upon that at all... if I was to be compassionate towards myself, I'd probably make sure I eat better, you know, take care of my body better ... I'm aware of what I need, but I always don't implement what I need, so I think that's the compassion, that's the movement, but it all comes from empathy.

Throughout the interview, Sonya spoke with speed and conviction, which led to a feeling of congruence between her and KJ. Sonya seemed determined to continue a journey of self-development, and this was reflected in the interpretative poem and creative response (Figure 1).

4.2 | Participant 2, Diane: 'Saying You Accept Things Is One Thing, But Really Feeling That You Do, That's Different'

Like Sonya, Diane began by explaining how self-empathy needs to come before self-compassion:

D: It's something I find difficult...and something I'm working on all the time. I'm maybe confusing the self-empathy with self-compassion...I think they are probably interchangeable. Really self-compassion and self-empathy, I think that I need to have the empathy before I can have the compassion.

Diane described compassion as kindness, although empathy was more of an understanding:

D: Maybe compassion is the kindness, and the empathy is the understanding... I don't think that you can be fully compassionate if you don't allow yourself to try and understand. So, I'm thinking of other people, and I guess the same would apply [to myself] that it might be a step that gets skipped, which is why maybe it's hard then to be kind because I haven't really given myself the opportunity to fully understand [myself].

Diane continued by giving an example of thinking in action and this seemed similar to Sonya's thoughts, especially since

'It comes from love'

Empath to others, not to myself.
Self-neglect comes easy, but
I understand why I do the things I do.
Yes, I understand.
A sorrowful belly,
With a mind full of growth.

Take a few deep breaths,
forgive yourself, feel some love for yourself,
know you're doing your best!
You are enough.
You are doing more than enough.
Find the patience and grace to carry on.

It all comes from love.
Empathy? Comes from love.
Definitely. Every time.
Love is a doing word.
Love is giving, love is sacrificial.

It all comes from empathy.
When I have that, I then know,
I need some compassion.
That's the moving part, but
it all comes from empathy.

Sometimes it's OK for me to feel like I can't cope.
It's okay, and when I feel this way,
When I accept this way,
That's when I have,
self-empathy.

A history of self-inattention,
Others are first in line.
If I could show myself
The same love,
I could be a force,
To be reckoned with.



FIGURE 1 | Interpretative poem and creative response (Sonya).

acceptance was important to both participants. Here, it was the understanding that must come before both the kindness and the acceptance:

D: I find it hard to be kind to myself when I make a mistake, but there's more to that than getting a full understanding of that situation... did I make a mistake or was it just that I didn't quite get it right? And aside from that mistake, what were the things that I did get right, and why? Why might it have been there on that occasion that I felt like I made a mistake. So, it's those things, I think, that lead to the kindness and the acceptance.

Diane emphasised that the self-understanding reached through reflection needed to be 'gentle' rather than critical:

D: It's being clear that the understanding is an empathic understanding, not a picking apart everything that you've done in a way that is a form of an eating away...

KJ: So, it's almost like a kindness, maybe.

D: Yeah, like a gentle understanding rather than pulling everything to pieces.

Diane returned to the need for gentleness when trying to understand things that might have happened, in the context of making

mistakes. When reflecting on things, it was hard for Diane to be gentle and there was a tendency to rush to reach understanding. Diane continued by explaining how self-care activities might lead to acceptance of things as they are:

D: ...if the same empathy I try to offer other people, I try to do that for myself, but that just doesn't come naturally to reflect as curiously and gently, I suppose. I rush myself a bit as well, to try and understand... why did this happen, where did it go wrong?... I've got better at it ... mindfulness, which I really get a lot from... reflective journaling, possibly poetry... that's the sort of thing I've done in the past. You know, things in the past that have been difficult... I've allowed myself the time to accept where I am now and then not trying to change it.

Acceptance seemed important to Diane when showing self-empathy and it seemed there was more certainty in the conversation at this point than at the start of the interview. Up until then, it felt like Diane had been thinking out loud but had now reached a firm understanding of self-empathy as something that included acceptance. However, achieving self-acceptance might be difficult:

D: I think acceptance is everything, really. I've just come to realise how important acceptance is... But it's not as simple, it's complex, isn't it, you know? Really accepting something is deep and complex. Saying you accept things is one thing, but really feeling that you do, that's different.

The certainty of Diane's words grew as the conversation turned to therapists' relationship with clients. Diane viewed self-empathy as a pre-requisite to being empathic with others:

D: I now actually think that I can't fully give it to others *until* I give it to myself. I think it does need to come to me first. Yeah, because I think that it needs to be, I think that it's hard to, it's hard for others to believe that we're understanding them and being empathic, if they can't see that we're doing that for ourselves. Even though we might want to give it, I don't know whether it can be received. And I think that maybe where myself and other people possibly struggle with it because we're all trying to give it to each other, but without doing it for ourselves, it's a bit of an impossible thing to achieve, isn't it?

Throughout the interview, Diane spoke thoughtfully, questioning, reviewing, and re-questioning until there was more certainty in the narrative. A lot of the data in this interview resonated with KJ as she could identify with the difficulty in self-acceptance, and this was a key influence in the poetic interpretation (Figure 2).

4.3 | Participant 3, Chris: 'This Is Something Much Bigger, Much Deeper, Much More Magical, Much More Special'

Chris began the interview by questioning how empathy might be experienced at an intrapersonal level. Like Diane, Chris seemed to be working out what self-empathy meant during the interview, almost thinking out loud:

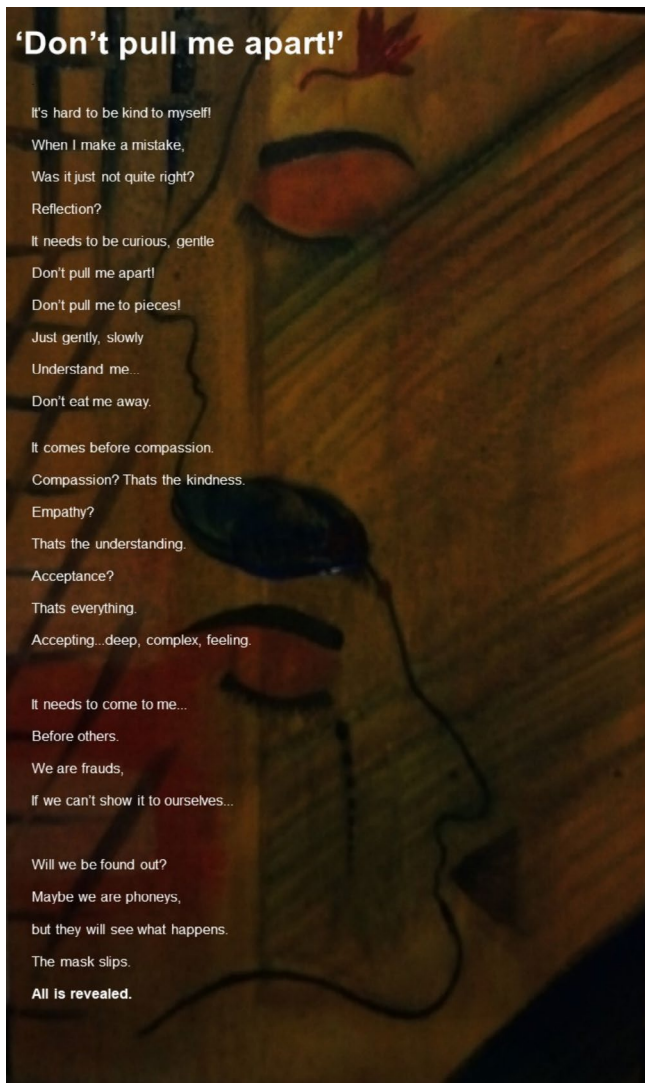


FIGURE 2 | Interpretative poem and creative response (Diane).

C: Hmm. I'd like to think yes. I feel like it's almost easier to empathise with other people... I've never thought about that before, because it is almost like it doesn't seem to work, because when you think of empathy, well for me, I always think of another person ... Obviously I'm actively feeling something. So, empathising with [oneself], it's almost like meditating then, isn't it?... This is interesting, I mean, you could broaden it to self-care as a form of empathy, self-love, self-care, self-awareness? Hmm. I'd like to think that I'm on the journey to it, if self-empathy is a thing, which I'm sure it is, I'd like to think I'm getting that.

Chris went on to explain the self/other aspects of empathy at an interpersonal level, although when one person in the relationship is removed, the process is internal, and meditation is key to this intrapersonal process:

C: Yeah, the way that I was thinking about it, empathy is about two beings so that empathy almost like, must exist between, because one needs to understand the other. But when you take that one away, I feel like it's *inside* the other and I know that meditation is a brilliant way to look into

yourself and to understand yourself, that self-exploration, self-understanding, self-awareness, all that.

Imagining the existence of two selves, with one sitting inside the head of the other, informed the questioning, and Chris continued to distinguish between a spiritual/physical or cognitive/feeling self or a 'person in a person'. This was more than just getting to know ourselves better, or undertaking self-care, and had a magical quality:

KJ: I'm fascinated by what you said, I mean, would it be right then to think, could you see yourself as two selves?

C: Yeah, in almost like a spiritual sense and a physical sense perhaps or, cognitive academic self in the head, and then the feeling, an empathic self, you know ... I can see it; I can see what I'm thinking of as sort of a person in a person ... I feel like it's almost superficial to just offer self-care... it's no, no, no, it's, this is something much bigger, much deeper, much more magical.

Chris became more certain that empathy could be intrapersonal, and KJ felt deeply connected to her, having used the word 'magical' in her own personal reflections when considering self-empathy prior to the commencement of the research:

C: You don't need to have another person to have that interaction to flick that empathy switch. If you've got that self-empathy, it's almost as if it doesn't turn off because it's *being* and it's there and it's not an optional thing.

Like Diane, Chris suggested that having self-empathy could support interpersonal relating more quickly and at a deeper level:

C: I feel like my self-empathy must have grown because it's always on now ...and that sounds corny, but it's so cool because it's just there and it's on and it helps with so much and you literally can connect with a person so much quicker and deeper with it.

KJ's view of self-empathy was most closely aligned with Chris's, in that it was a way of being, and once turned on it might be difficult to switch off, especially as it enabled greater connection with both the self and, subsequently, others. The poetic interpretation prioritises the magical quality that Chris described and the speed at which the interview proceeded, characterised by single words and the use of exclamation points to represent the pace at which the words were spoken (Figure 3).

Through the poetic interpretation, there was a feeling of journeying together, to arrive at the meaning of self-empathy, with Chris's thoughts being most aligned with that of the researchers.

4.4 | Participant 4, Charley: 'Red Team and Blue Team, Let's Work Together Here!'

The interview began with Charley providing an example of self-empathy prior to meeting a client. There were immediate

‘Just Magical’

Maybe its meditation Or magic. Self-care. Self-love. Self-awareness. It's a journey! Two beings, One inside the other. Self-exploration A superpower!	It is precious, Builds connection. Helps celebrate. Helps sadness. Just being Not optional Like a tree, existing.
Spiritual, Physical, cognitive, academic Feeling...empathic! Not just self-care Too superficial This is magic. A superpower!	Switched on! Self-acceptance Self-awareness Grand scale! Connection, magic, spiritual, shared, Magical! This is me That's it, No apology This is wonderful. This is magical!



FIGURE 3 | Interpretative poem and creative response (Chris).

resonances with the other interviews in terms of a description of two ‘beings’ within themselves, engaging in dialogue:

C: I’m not there to perform any miracles or to say the right things or come up with something clever that they want to hear, it’s purely just staying at their level, understanding them, and then just reflecting and paraphrasing ... So, I just said those words to myself while I sat there, and I just breathed ... I think that was important to have that self-discussion and I suppose it is a form of self-empathy, because you are having that talk to yourself and you are reassuring yourself... I could say like, oh, maybe I didn’t quite do this well enough, and I didn’t do that, but I just thought, what purpose does that serve?

Charley explained how the creative aspects of the counselling course had supported this self-empathic growth:

C: So that’s a prime example of it [self-empathy] but I’ve only learnt to do that from the course, moments where we have had points of self-empathy, where we’ve done a bit of mindfulness or meditation, or we’ve thrown about

some scarves and done some dancing and all that sort of stuff and as silly as that sounds ... letting loose and being silly and doing those things actually has served as a good reminder for me...

Throughout the interview, there was an exploration of self-empathy as being about a connection with our own feelings, through meditative thinking. Further, Charley suggested connection with others, through empathic relationships, was helpful to support empathy to the self:

C: I’ve had an impact on someone so greatly by just being me and this is like the most powerful form of sort of empathy that I felt towards myself. But then that added on to my *own* self-empathy, because then I thought, wow, they think that and it must mean I do good and I do make a good impression and that I do care and people really value and respect me and, it just feeds my need to show myself empathy...

This seemed like Diane’s interview, with the exploration of self-empathy being a pre-requisite to showing it to other people. Charley continued by discussing how being self-congruent was key to self-empathy development and this had been supported by engaging in personal therapy:

C: I’m in quite a congruent place between what I feel and think. It is all clear and coherent now, especially after personal therapy. That’s a key thing to link to self, self-love, self-empathy... because without that, I’d say my self-empathy would have been a lot more of a struggle.

Like Chris, Charley described the existence of an internal other in supporting self-empathy, in this case, a voice which accepted or made peace with current feelings. For KJ, this view resonated as she recalled her own internal voice, which often acted as a reassuring presence when things in life were challenging:

C: ... how I see it for myself would be the awareness of what’s going on within me and being kind to that. So, a voice, if it’s good or bad and understanding why it’s there and respecting it ... If it’s negative, then that’s fine, but it’s just being with that for yourself, I suppose. So being empathic to yourself would just be like saying, ‘you know, you don’t have to be happy right now’ or ‘it’s OK to be sad’ or it’s making peace with whatever that feeling is within you, I suppose.

Charley developed the discussion into a metaphor of a red team and blue team, having to work together, and this encapsulated self-empathy:

KJ: So, it sounds like you are almost describing two voices almost ... I’m hearing two different aspects that enables the self-empathy.

C: Yeah. Yeah. Because I feel like there is that internal voice that everyone has but I sort of see it as a narration of what’s going on. So, I think that’s important to listen to. But then there’s also like a gut feeling and like a felt sense within you. Those two seem to be either working on the same team or sometimes completely against each other. So, I guess having that self-empathy would be going OK, you know, red team and blue team, you know, let’s work together here!

'At peace with myself'

Want a miracle?
I am not here for that.
Or to say the things,
you want to hear.

Let me breathe.
Talk to my other self.
Offer some reassurance.
No over thinking.
Certainly not stressing!

Be kind to myself.
Dance about, glittery scarves!
I'm not just
about the books.

Screw it!
Go for a walk,
sit down,
ten minutes,
nice music.
YEAH!

Congruence.

Thats the key,
self-love, self-empathy.
Without that?
I can't go there.
So many internal voices

'You don't have to be happy right now!'
Important to listen.
Your gut.
Your felt sense,
all the voices!

Red team, blue team,
let's work together guys!
There's the congruence.
There's self-empathy.
I see it now.

Thinking, feeling, actions.
Smooth flowing.
Thats when its best.
Let's all agree.
Open the door,
for more to come in



FIGURE 4 | Interpretative poem and creative response (Charley).

During the interview, Charley spoke quickly and seemed enthusiastic about the topic of self-empathy, bringing the interview to life with a playful team metaphor. Charley had developed self-knowledge during the course, and through personal therapy had reached a place of congruence, which had supported self-empathy (Figure 4).

Further interpretation of Charley's data revealed self-care as a prominent aspect of self-empathy. Reflecting in the context of the full dataset, Charley spoke more explicitly about the importance of self-care in contrast to the other participants, although there were reminders of the feelings of self-forgiveness derived from both Sonya and Diane's data.

5 | Discussion

The findings revealed self-empathy as a state of self-kindness and a process of internal reasoning that enabled a balanced re-evaluation of events, leading to self-acceptance. These findings most closely align with Bohart and Greenberg's (1997) assertion of self-empathy as a state of self-acceptance and the existence of different selves conversing with each other. Poetic inquiry amplified this understanding, starting with the participant data, used as a foundation for the back-and-forth interpretative movement, culminating in an embodied understanding. Galvin and Todres (2009) describe the limitations of transcribed interview text, which can often neglect the complexity of another's experience. Conversely, poetry enables additional layers to be revealed, providing the freedom to 're'-present, moving away from the words in the transcript, to recognise how experience belongs to both the participant and researcher in, '...a meaningful-world-with-others' (p. 314).

5.1 | Self-Acceptance

Reflecting on the data revealed similarities to Sherman (2014), most notably her discussion of self-empathy as a vehicle for emotional growth. Sherman cautioned that self-empathy might involve re-experiencing potentially traumatic events, revisiting a perspective from which we are trying to break free. However, in a psychotherapy context, it can lead to, '...fairer self-judgment and less rigid notions of success and failure, which ultimately would help loosen self-destructive feelings...' (Sherman 2014, 228). Indeed, this research revealed participants felt the need for less self-criticality and more acceptance when reviewing past events, for example, the promotion of a gentler and kinder understanding of experiences, something the first author could relate to. It is acknowledged that the poetry not only represented the participants' voices but also those of the researchers, and for KJ, moving towards an acceptance of herself as a psychotherapist engendered a felt sense, which went beyond a feeling to a bodily awareness, amplified through the poetry. It is this state that Brown et al. (2021) suggest poetic inquirers aim for when they make embodied interpretations, although this might be difficult to articulate within the poetry. Galvin and Todres (2009, 312) suggest '... certain words feel right' and this was prominent in Sonya's exploration of self-empathy as self-love. The gentle and tender feelings of self-love (expressed visually through the texture of the rose petals,

feather, and warm colours), permeating different aspects of self (symbolised through shells and fabric) informed the creation of the first poem. Going from the original experience to the transcripts, then back to the initial understanding, in a circular reflective style, enabled the development of the poetry and the location of the 'right' words, colours and textures, arising from the researchers' felt sense.

Self-empathy was experienced as a mediator for self-love, which could lead to a state of both emotional self-acceptance and of situations being as they are, without the need for harsh self-criticism. Self-acceptance supports a person's growth, '...in the process of becoming' within a psychotherapeutic relationship (Rogers 1967, 63); as clients listen more accurately to their own feelings, they evaluate less and accept more, which leads them towards greater congruence. In this research, this process seemed to occur at an intrapersonal level outside of the therapeutic relationship, although personal therapy was viewed as a pre-cursor by some participants.

The mandatory requirement for personal psychotherapy in therapist training can be positive, revealing a greater sense of authenticity and self-acceptance (Murphy et al. 2018). Mandatory therapy could serve to challenge therapists' habits of mind in the move towards self-direction and '...being, knowingly and acceptingly, the process which he inwardly and actually is' (Rogers 1967, 175). Even though self-acceptance in this research was reported as challenging and time consuming, it was supported by activities, such as journaling and mindfulness practices. This finding concurs with Rogers' (2011) assertion that through creativity we can accept any aspect of ourselves, and further, our self-acceptance is integral in the therapeutic relationship with others.

5.2 | Self-Talk

Self-acceptance was experienced by some participants through a process of internal narrative, self-dialogue, or self-talk, in which different 'selves' conversed to explore options. Some participants articulated this process in terms of a cognitive and emotional self, which needed to work in harmony to achieve self-empathy. Other participants viewed their 'selves' as existing inside each other, rather than alongside, leading to heightened self-awareness through a process of meditation.

Honos-Webb and Stiles (1998) suggest multiple theories identifying the existence of several internal entities, known more generically as voices. Although people strive for self-actualisation, viewed as a wholeness of being, division is caused through differences between the self-concept and the reality of experience (Rogers 1951). Cooper (2017) drew parallels with this difference and Buber's (1947) 'I-It' mode of interpersonal relating, and explored how this could be applied *intrapersonally* and become a cause of psychological distress. He suggested an 'I-Me' mode of self-relating, which could be directed to different parts of ourselves. In this mode, the 'me' is an 'empirical, object-like entity', which can lead to objectification and self-criticism (Finan et al. 2021). Disowning, rather than accepting, a way of being, might lead to a state of internal conflict and subsequent psychological difficulty (Cooper 2003). In contrast, an 'I-I' mode

is an ‘... an active phenomenologically experiencing, meaning-orientated being’ (p. 64). Data revealed a self-empathic state as being one experienced as a holistic appreciation of the self, in contrast to the ‘it-ifying’ of the ‘I-Me’ mode. For example, participants moved from an objective observation of behaviours to an acceptance of vulnerability, which led to an understanding of the need for self-kindness. Such a relationship has similarities to Jordan’s (1991) description of self-empathy and not only enables people to relate to their own ‘otherness’ but also understand and learn from it (Mearns and Cooper 2018).

Understanding internal narratives or ‘self-talk’ is important in the context of self-empathy, since high levels of self-reinforcing self-talk are linked to higher self-esteem and more automatic positive self-statements (Brinthaup et al. 2009). In this research, participants offered their own ways of intrapersonal relating as part of a self-empathic state. Meditation, mindfulness, reflection, poetry, and being outdoors were all offered as helpful ways to strengthen self-empathy. Self-talk was a prominent aspect of Charley’s interview, something which evoked a felt sense within the authors. This theme and the complexity of internal dialogue within the transcript were captured through the infusion and layering of multiple colours and shapes interacting with each other. Through the poetic inquiry emerged a direction to KJ to ‘open the door, for more (self-empathy) to come in’, and led to different insight into her own way of being and development. Indeed, expressing artistically enables both researcher and reader to not only learn more about the relationship between the text and participants but also about themselves. In agreement with Glesne (1997), such writing helps to promote feelings of hope and connection, both with self and others, offering a third voice to make statements and evoke feelings.

What emerged through the data analysis was when one aspect of the self could acknowledge the needs of another this enabled the different aspects to work as a team. As suggested by Cooper and Rowan (1999, 8) ‘... acceptance and understanding between the different voices and an appreciation of diversity and difference...’ is needed to enable the self to function. This is an important finding since although more needs to be known about the experiences of therapists-in-training (Pierce 2016), educational preparation can leave students in a state of distress due to feelings of incompetence and anxiety (Grafaniki 2010). In this context, self-empathy could act as an ameliorating factor during the educational preparation of therapists and could be facilitated through creative exploration.

5.3 | Self-Compassion

There were questions at the start of this research about whether self-empathy could be developed outside of a therapy relationship and whether it was different to, or encompassed elements of, self-compassion. Self-compassion has undergone more extensive research than self-empathy, although similarities were described by the participants in this study. According to Neff (2023, 201) ‘... self-compassion is a way of relating to the ever-changing experience of who we are with kindness and acceptance’, and such acceptance was described as a feature

of self-empathy in this research. However, two participants in this study explored self-empathy as a pre-requisite to self-compassion. Self-compassion was viewed as an active self-care activity, whereas self-empathy was needed first, to gain self-love and understanding. For one participant, empathy related to self-understanding whereas compassion was more strongly linked to kindness. Poetic inquiry enabled these points to be distilled, and this was evident in Diane’s poem, ‘Don’t pull me apart!’. Writing this poem amplified the difference, as experienced by the participants, between self-compassion and self-empathy. Through the poetry writing, KJ entered a meditative state, described by Heidegger (1966, 53) as one which requires us to keep an open mind, rather than ‘...cling one-sidedly to a single idea...’, something that might be experienced when trying to develop concise themes. Being open-minded is advantageous and supports the back-and-forth motion between participant, wider dataset, researcher, and any pre-understandings. In doing so, different insights are revealed and pre-understandings are questioned. Poetry can then support the presentation of such insight in more concise ways, for example, using metaphor or imagery. Visual artistic representation with two faces of self facing away from each other captured the raw and visceral emotions that the transcript evoked in SA. Using imagery, often found in poetry, supports a more powerful presentation of data than using descriptive transcript excerpts alone. For example, the image of being ‘pulled apart’ conveys deeper meaning than a description of being criticised. Describing a ‘mask slipping’ amplifies the importance of first showing ourselves self-empathy to support clients to do the same more powerfully than a description of the process alone. In using powerful images, researchers stir a response in the reader, grounded in their own past and present experiences and feelings. The response, driven by the words used, is described as the ‘real’ poem, something experienced within each reader (Stageberg and Anderson 1952, 5).

As empathy is usually experienced interpersonally, it was perhaps unsurprising that two participants continued this theme but applied it *intrapersonally*. This led to a discussion about different selves existing next to, or inside of, the others. In her description of self-compassion, Neff (2023) describes common humanity as a connection to other people. In contrast, self-empathy in this study, related to a *self-connection*, for example between the cognitive and emotional self, is often experienced through a self-narration. It could be argued that the ‘balanced awareness’ (Neff 2023, 196) found in a self-compassionate state would involve a connection between different aspects of the self, although in this study, it was described as a defining feature of self-empathy. This finding was perhaps heavily influenced by the fact that empathy is usually viewed as a state involving more than one person, so participants were able to apply this experience at an intrapersonal level, as a way of understanding the concept. Neff (2003) viewed self-empathy as being reliant on interpersonal contact in a therapeutic relationship, although for all participants in this study, self-empathy was experienced *outside* of therapy even though, for one student, personal therapy was explicitly mentioned as a contributory factor to its development. Like self-compassion, self-empathy was experienced through activities such as meditation, journaling, and poetry writing and did not rely on the presence of another.

6 | Conclusions

In the context of psychotherapist educational preparation, this study suggests self-empathy might offer some protective effects through the promotion of self-acceptance, self-talk, and the recognition of the importance of self-care activities. Poetic inquiry supported a more nuanced understanding of the data, over and above the key themes, and enabled the findings to be presented in more powerful ways, using fewer words and images to support understanding. Using poetry enabled the researchers to explore connections between the themes and amplified the sensory and emotional nature of the students' experiences. Further, it supported the reflexive voice of the researchers to be heard, supporting the credibility of the research and enhancing understanding of the co-creative approach.

We interpreted the data as revealing the world of the student psychotherapist to be one of uncertainty, with some participants exploring the stressful nature of their experience, thereby adding to the learning about the complex nature of therapist preparation. Self-empathy was experienced as self-acceptance and an understanding that self-care might be required, or at least a perspectival shift, which enabled the participants to carry on.

Self-empathy was experienced differently to self-compassion, although there was some overlap between the two concepts. Exploring self-empathy as a distinct concept revealed it as a state of self-acceptance, relying on intrapersonal relationships and the existence of different selves working in harmony. Further, the use of creative methods seemed helpful to its development. This is important when considering psychotherapist preparation, for example, during personal development groups or when supporting reflective practices.

6.1 | Limitations

A strength of this research was a small sample size, which enabled an in-depth exploration of a purposive group of participants, all from one postgraduate educational programme. It is recognised that a sample drawn from multiple programmes might have led to different perspectives on self-empathy. However, it was never the intention to generalise the research, and its strength lies in its interpretative case-based approach to analysis (Malterud et al. 2016). Readers can interpret the data through their own interpretative lens and in the context of other research when deciding whether to apply the findings in their own setting or to inform curriculum development and further research.

Consent

The authors have nothing to report.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Data is available through the Figshare platform.

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