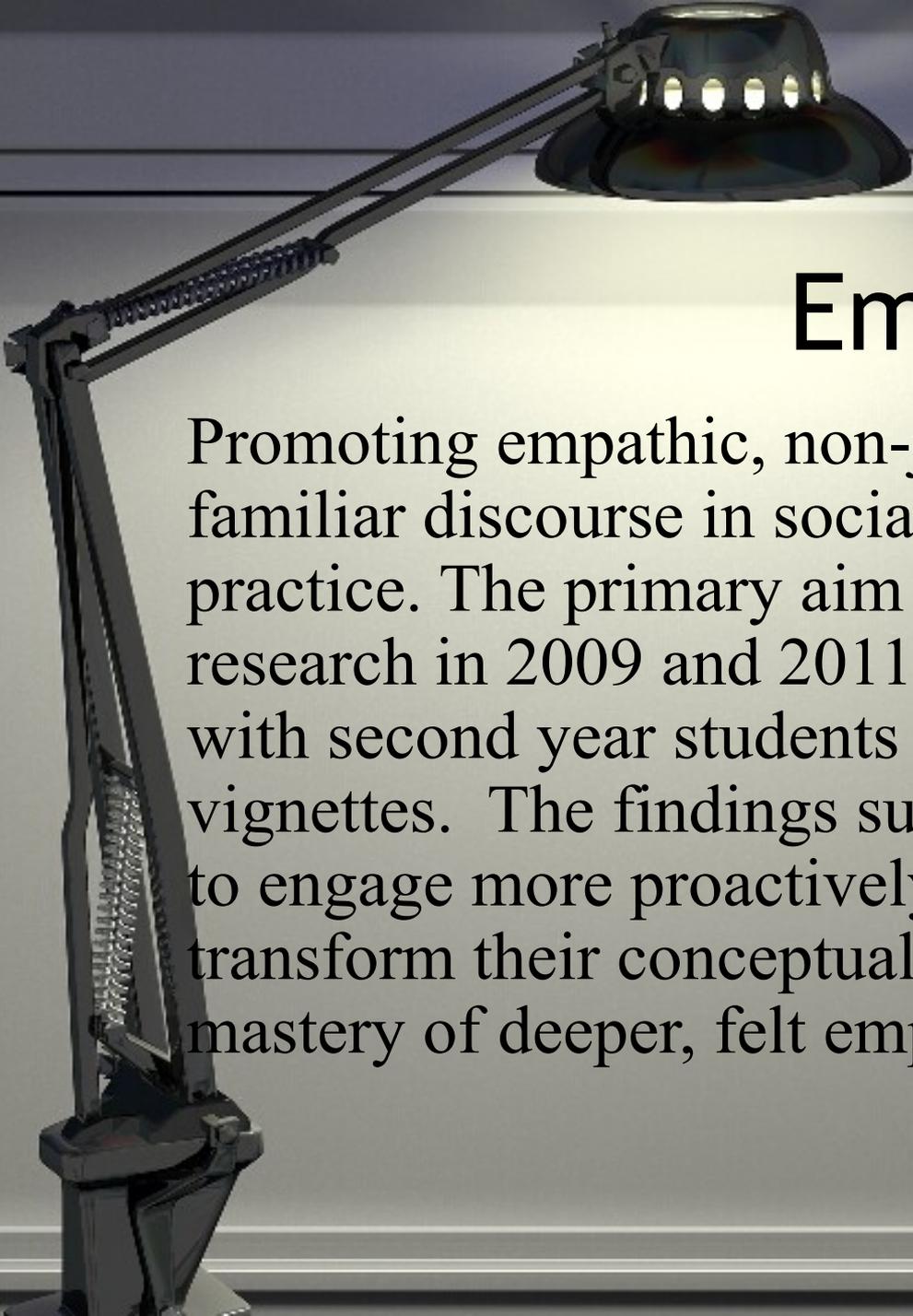


Students' responses to vignettes
featuring cultural differences-
evidence of an empathy gap and
value judgments?

Susan Gair, Sept, 2012

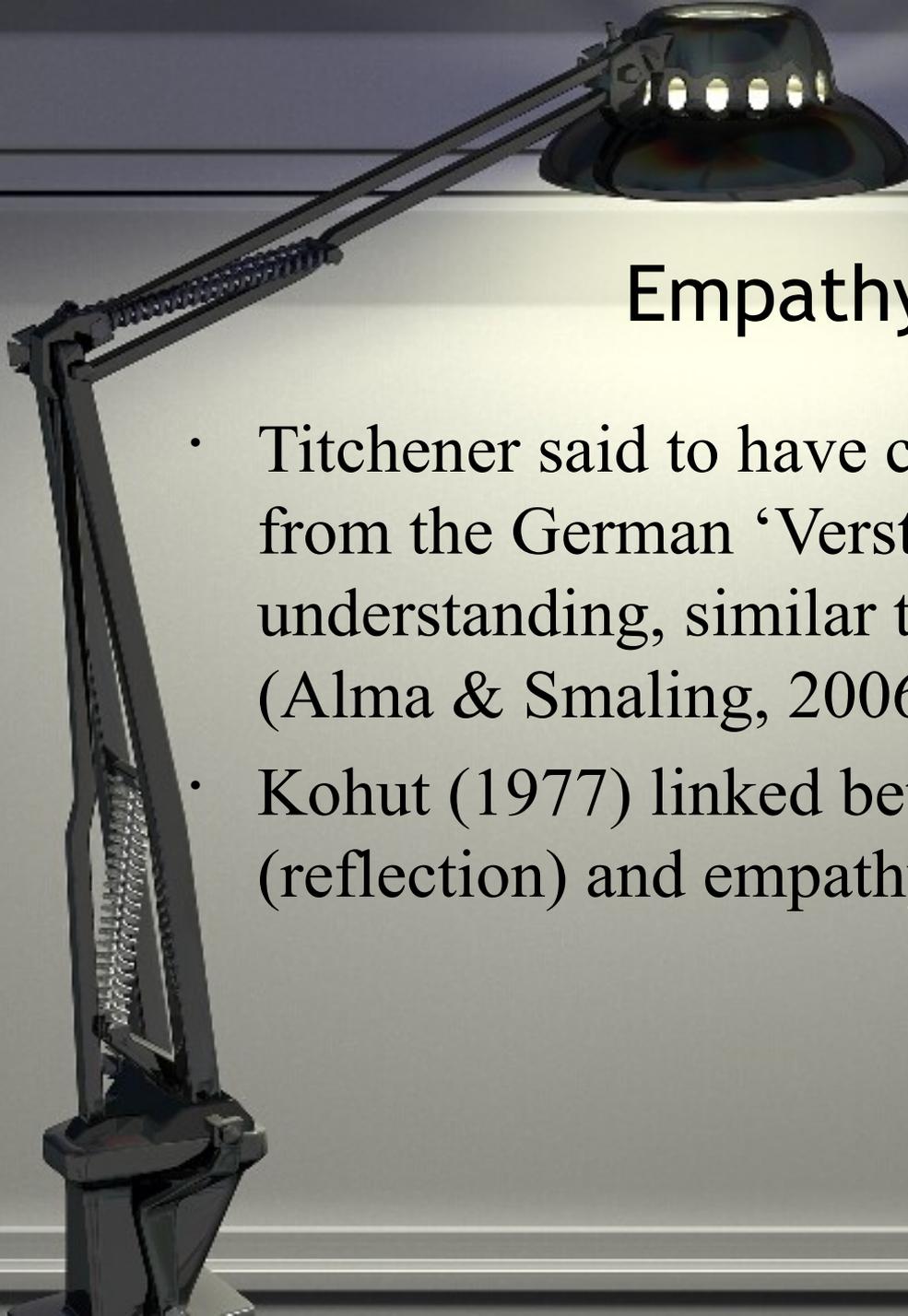
AASWWE Symposium

Cultural Diversity-Social Work and Human Services
education working with difference



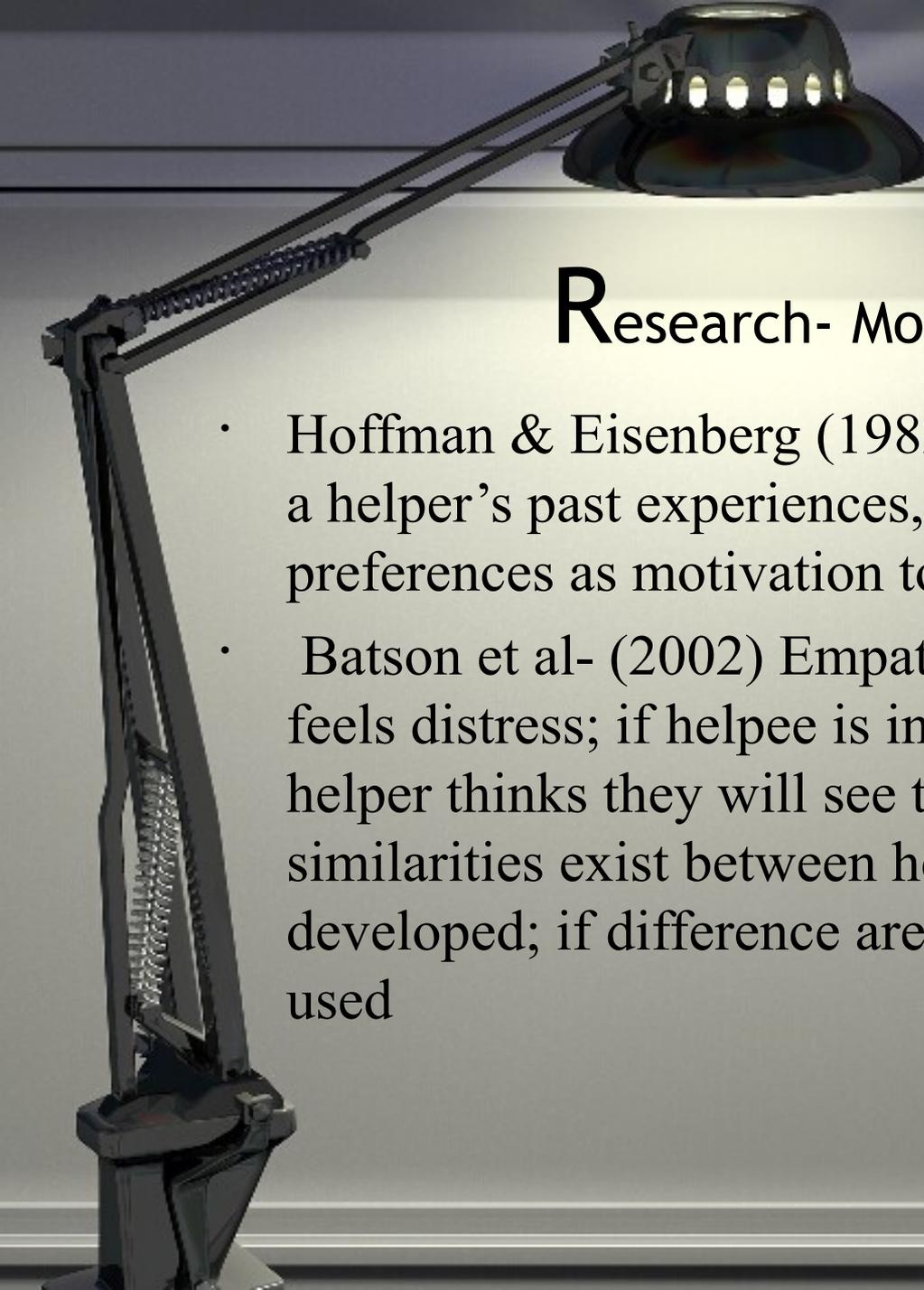
Empathy

Promoting empathic, non-judgmental helping is familiar discourse in social work education and practice. The primary aim of my classroom-based research in 2009 and 2011 was to explore empathy with second year students through the use of selected vignettes. The findings suggest educators may need to engage more proactively with students, to transform their conceptual understanding into a mastery of deeper, felt empathy.



Empathy - beginnings

- Titchener said to have coined the term ‘empathy’ from the German ‘Verstehen’ for empathic understanding, similar to the Greek ‘empathia’ (Alma & Smaling, 2006; Wispe, 1987).
- Kohut (1977) linked between introspection (reflection) and empathy.



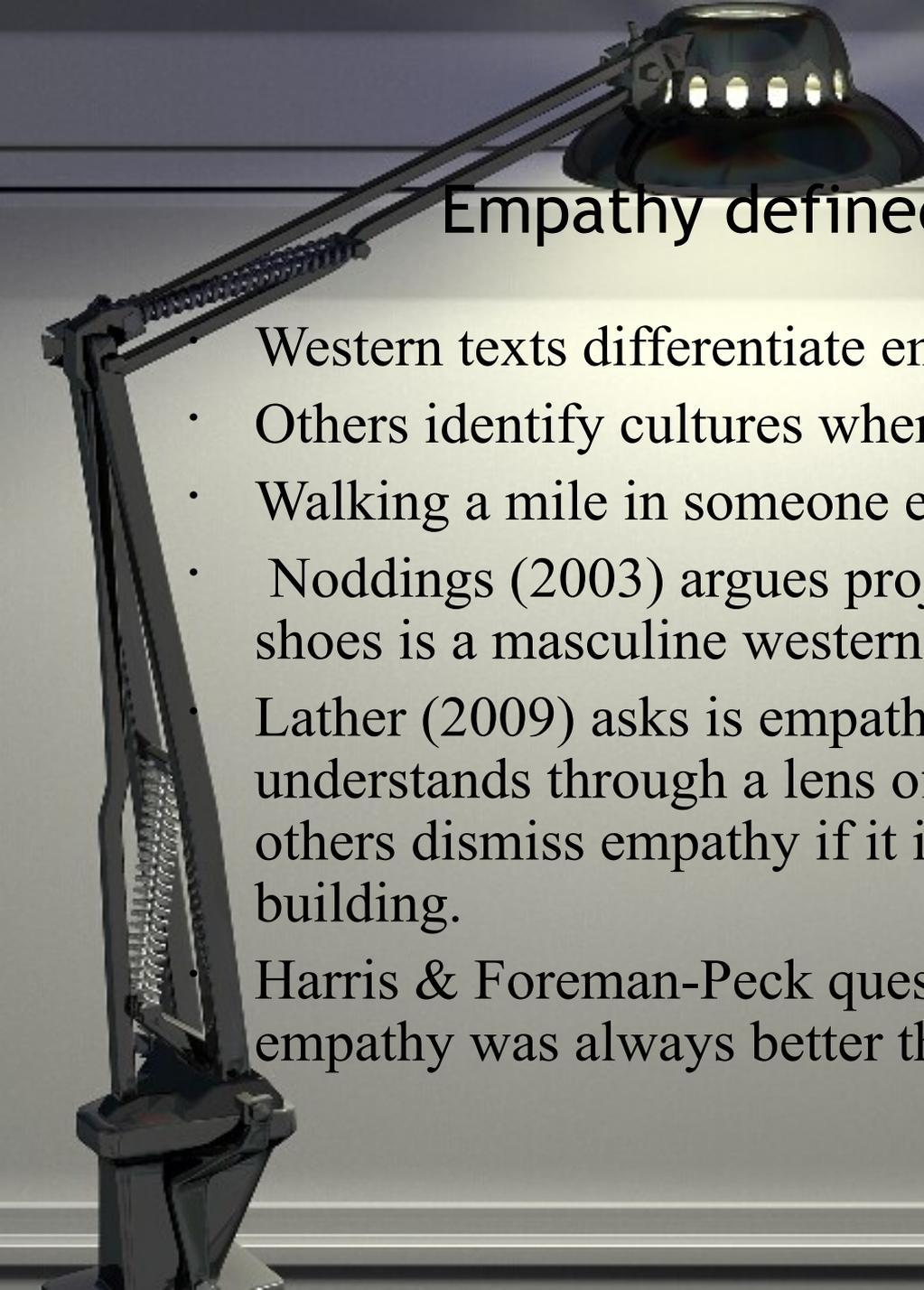
Research- Motivation to empathise

- Hoffman & Eisenberg (1982) looked at the role of altruism, a helper's past experiences, perspective taking and in-group preferences as motivation to empathise.
- Batson et al- (2002) Empathy is given when helper sees or feels distress; if helpee is in an identified 'needy' group; if helper thinks they will see the results of their help; if similarities exist between helpee/ helper &/or if trust has developed; if difference are valued; & if self disclosure is used



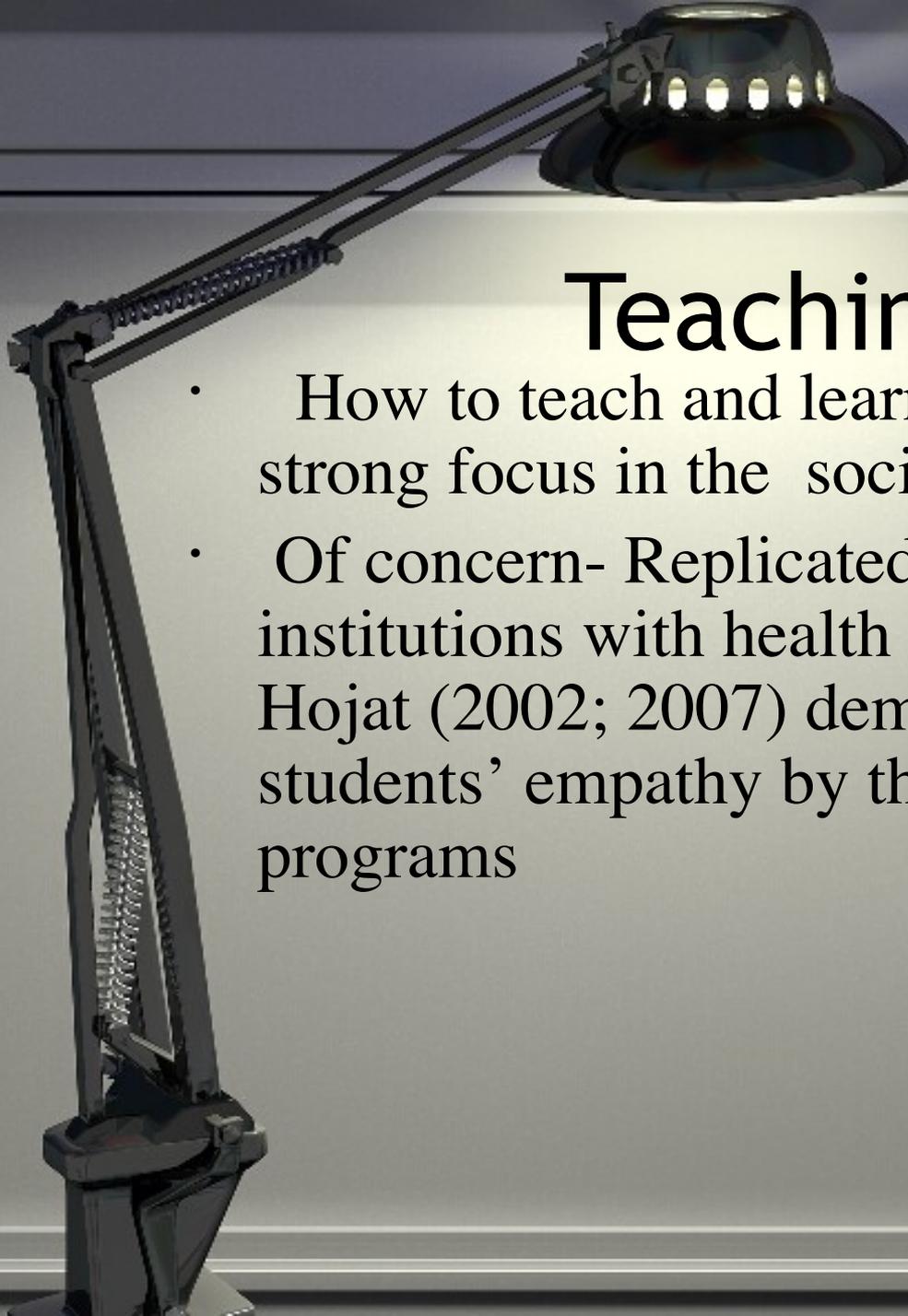
Empathy- in-group preference?

- De Vignemont & Singer (2006) identified that contextual appraisal occurs in communication processes that may intervene in empathy
- Recently Gutsell & Inzlicht (2010) examined mirror neurons & neural networks in the brain & confirmed in-group empathy preferences.
 - Although empathy research is plentiful-Research exploring cultural empathy, & cross-cultural empathy seems less common.



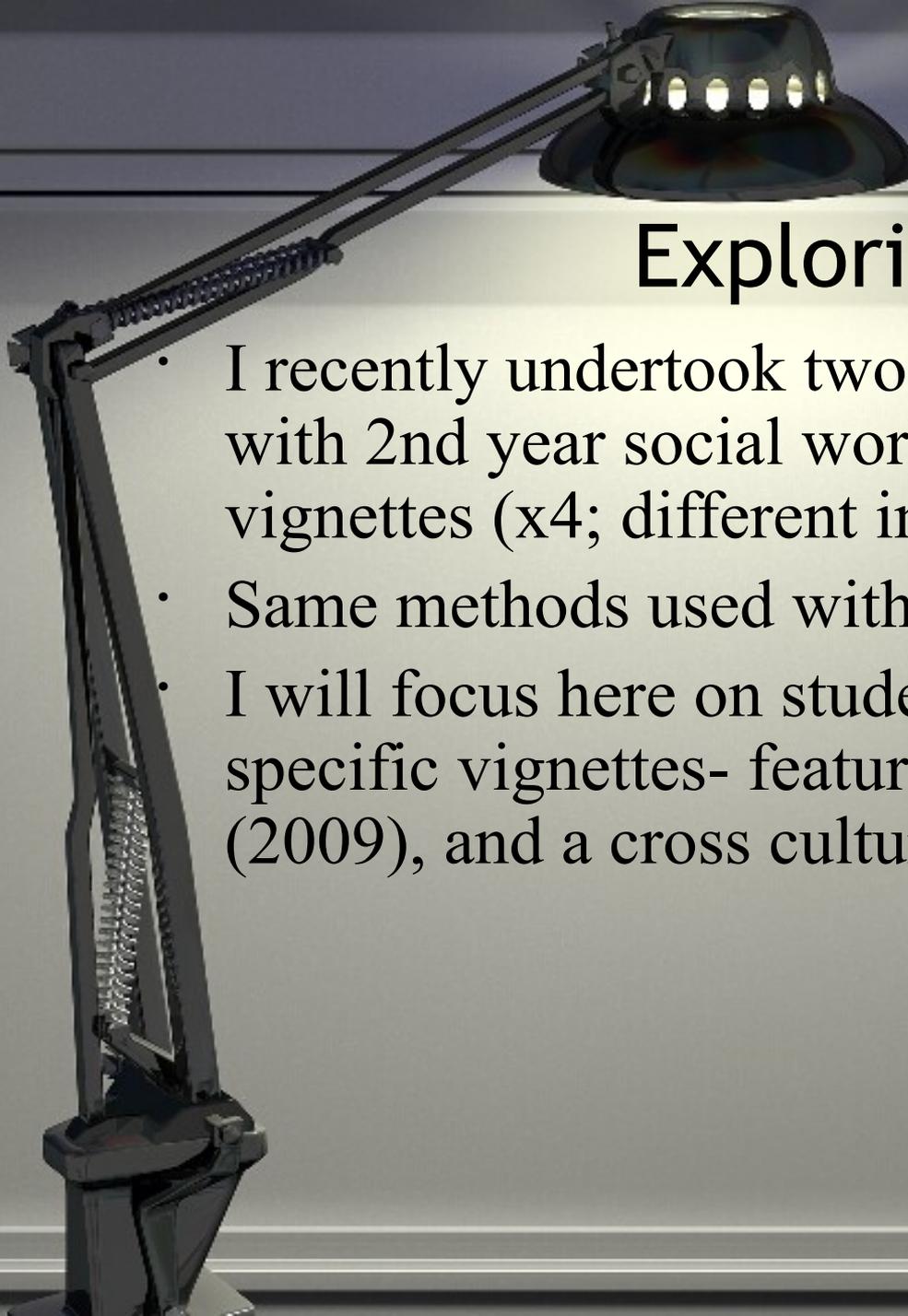
Empathy defined- But is it legitimate?

- Western texts differentiate empathy from sympathy
- Others identify cultures where their meanings overlap.
- Walking a mile in someone else's shoes' a common adage
- Noddings (2003) argues projecting oneself into another's shoes is a masculine western viewpoint.
- Lather (2009) asks is empathy even legitimate if the listener understands through a lens of their own experiences while others dismiss empathy if it is feigned to enable rapport-building.
- Harris & Foreman-Peck questioned whether common wound empathy was always better than no common experiences



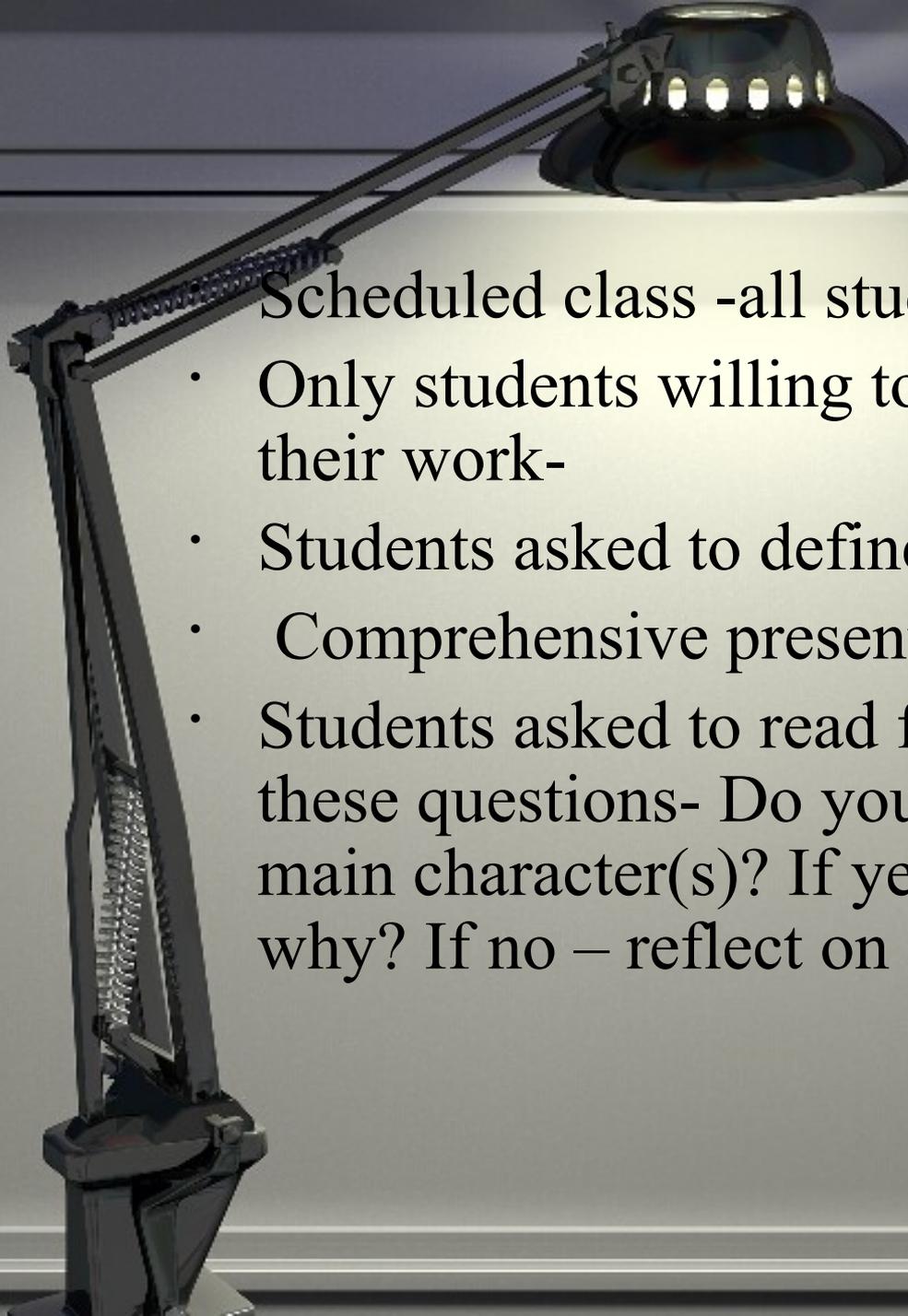
Teaching Empathy

- How to teach and learn empathy has not been a strong focus in the social work literature.
- Of concern- Replicated studies across time and institutions with health and medical students by Hojat (2002; 2007) demonstrates a reduction in students' empathy by the end of their educational programs



Exploring Empathy

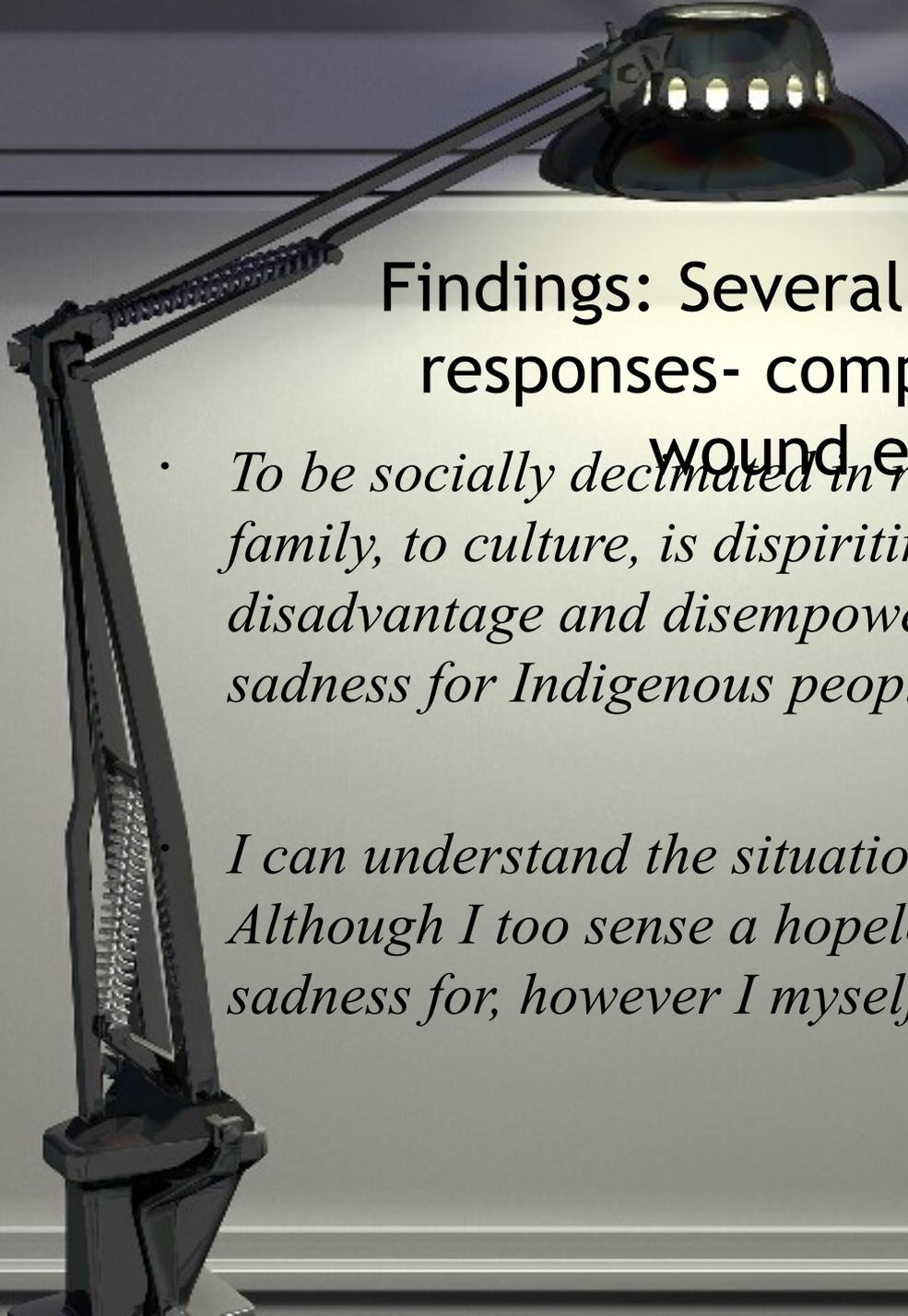
- I recently undertook two projects in 2009 and 2011 with 2nd year social work students- with real life vignettes (x4; different in 2009 & 2011)
- Same methods used with similar results-
- I will focus here on students' responses to two specific vignettes- featuring an Aboriginal elder (2009), and a cross cultural adoption context (2011).



Method-

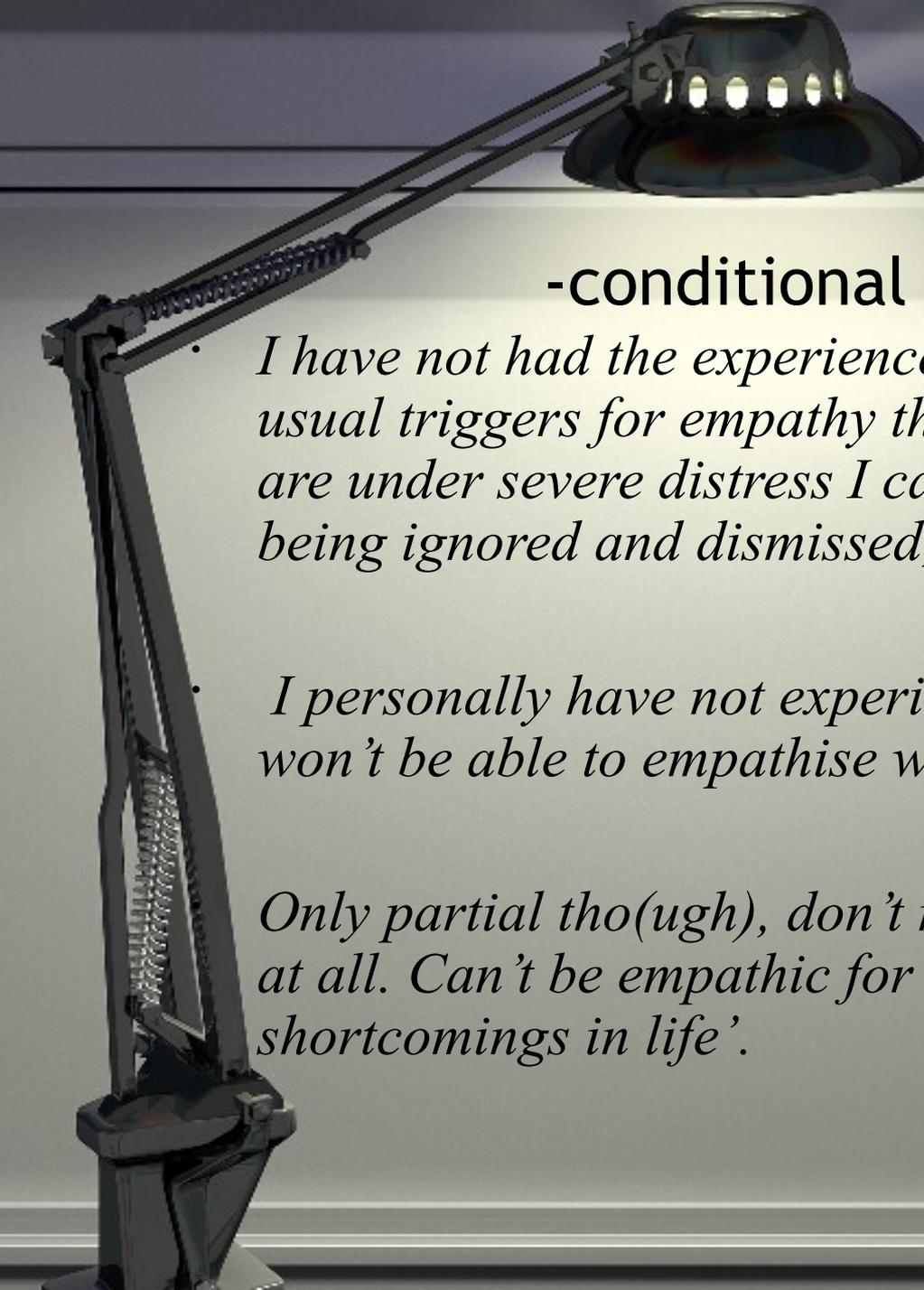
Scheduled class -all students participated

- Only students willing to be in research handed in their work-
- Students asked to define empathy- I will revisit
- Comprehensive presentation about empathy
- Students asked to read four vignettes and answer these questions- Do you have empathy for the main character(s)? If yes- reflect on and explain why? If no – reflect on and explain why not?



Findings: Several examples of students' responses- compassionate or common
wound empathy (2009)

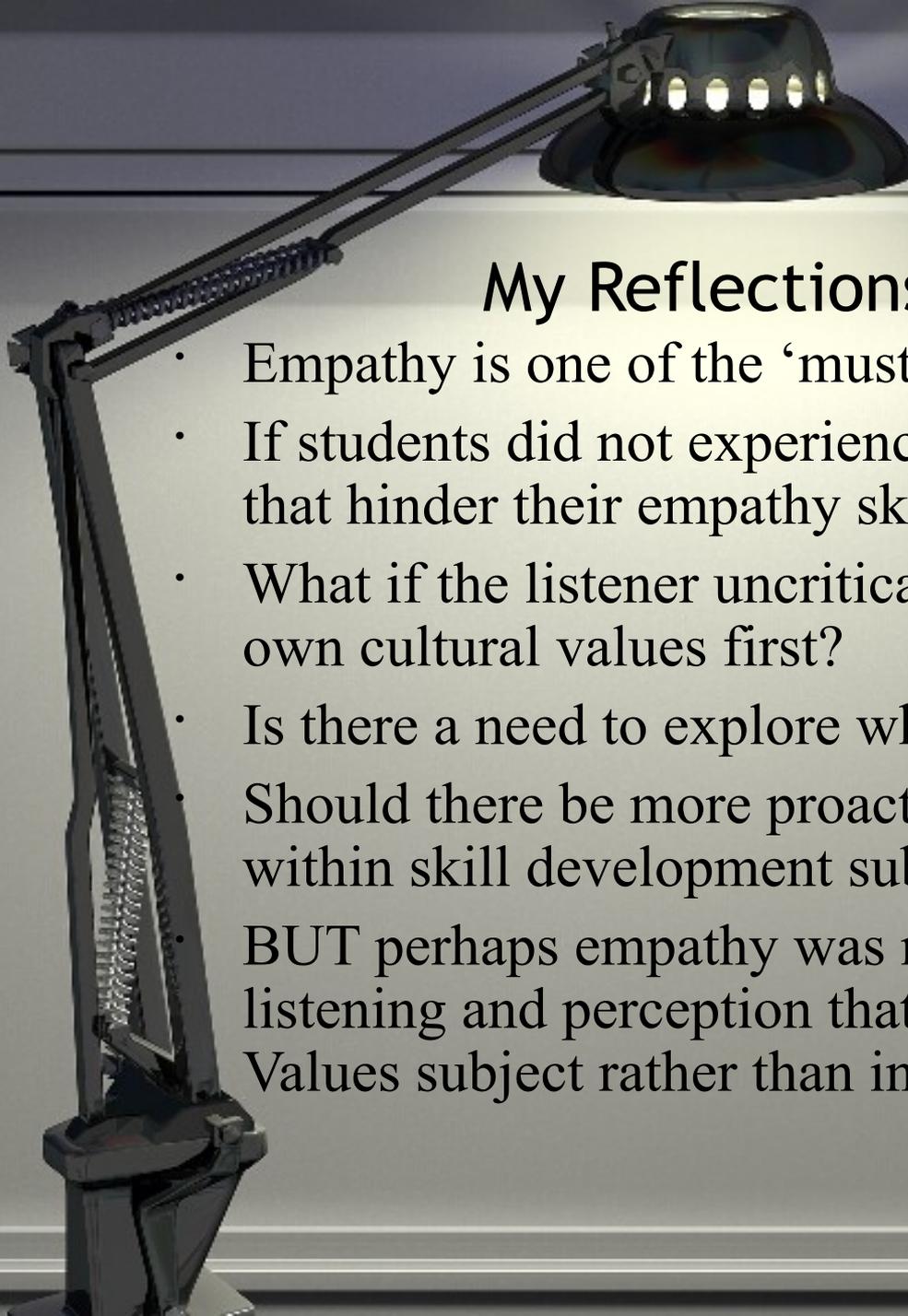
- *To be socially devalued in respect to connection to land, to family, to culture, is dispiriting and it is a position of extreme disadvantage and disempowerment. This makes me feel sadness for Indigenous people*
- *I can understand the situation being Indigenous myself. Although I too sense a hopelessness in this piece, which I felt sadness for, however I myself feel hope*



-conditional or limited empathy

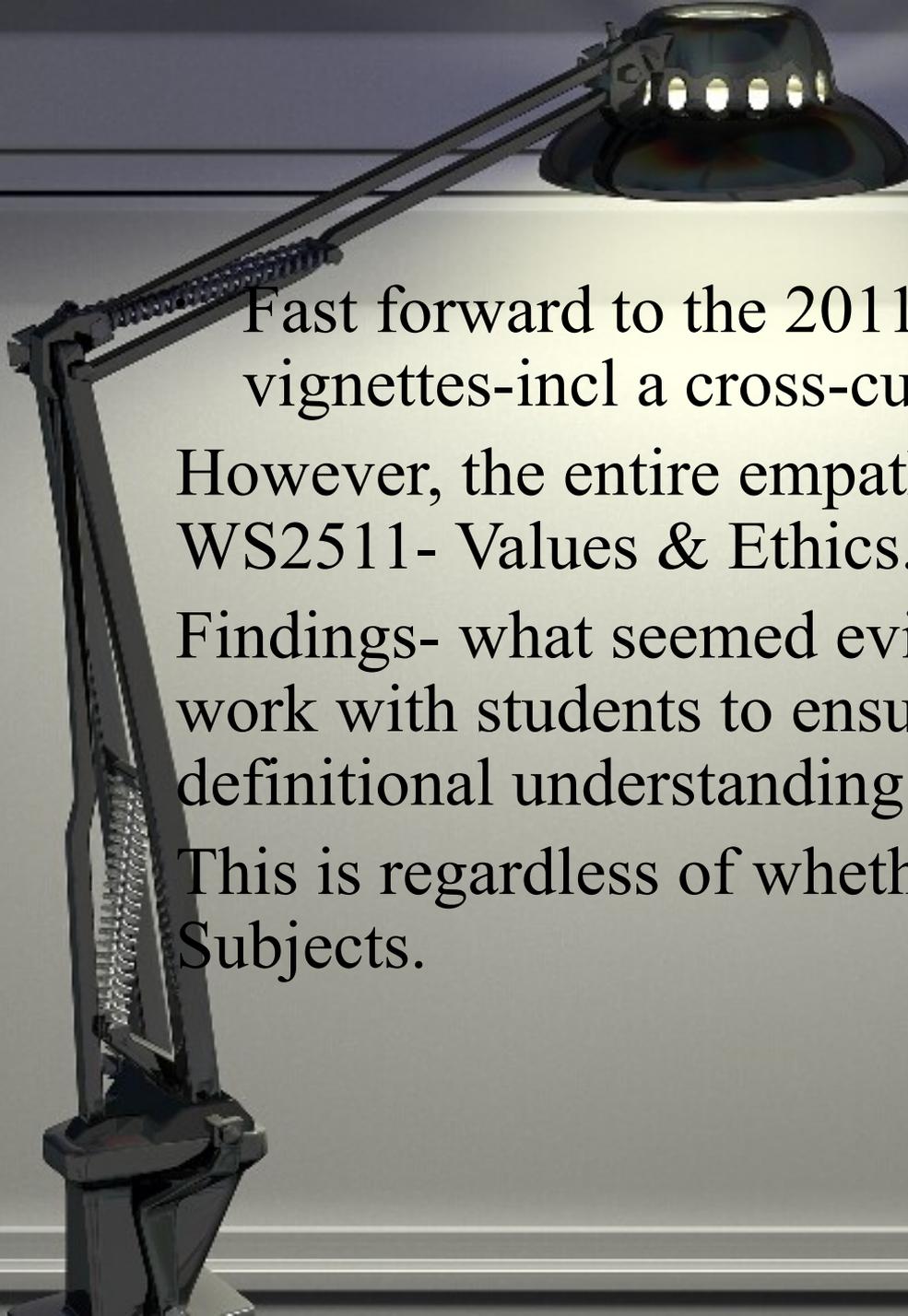
- *I have not had the experience... I can identify that out of the usual triggers for empathy that they are needy and that they are under severe distress I can empathise with his feelings of being ignored and dismissed, and his anger*
- *I personally have not experienced feeling the way ... so I won't be able to empathise with him*

Only partial tho(ugh), don't really understand the situation at all. Can't be empathic for using the situation for their shortcomings in life'.



My Reflections on those findings-

- Empathy is one of the ‘must have’ skills for social work
- If students did not experience something themselves does that hinder their empathy skills;
- What if the listener uncritically views the story through their own cultural values first?
- Is there a need to explore when empathy might be harder?
- Should there be more proactive cultivation of empathy within skill development subjects.
- BUT perhaps empathy was not a Skill? More a value-based listening and perception that needed to be in Ethics and Values subject rather than interpersonal skills?



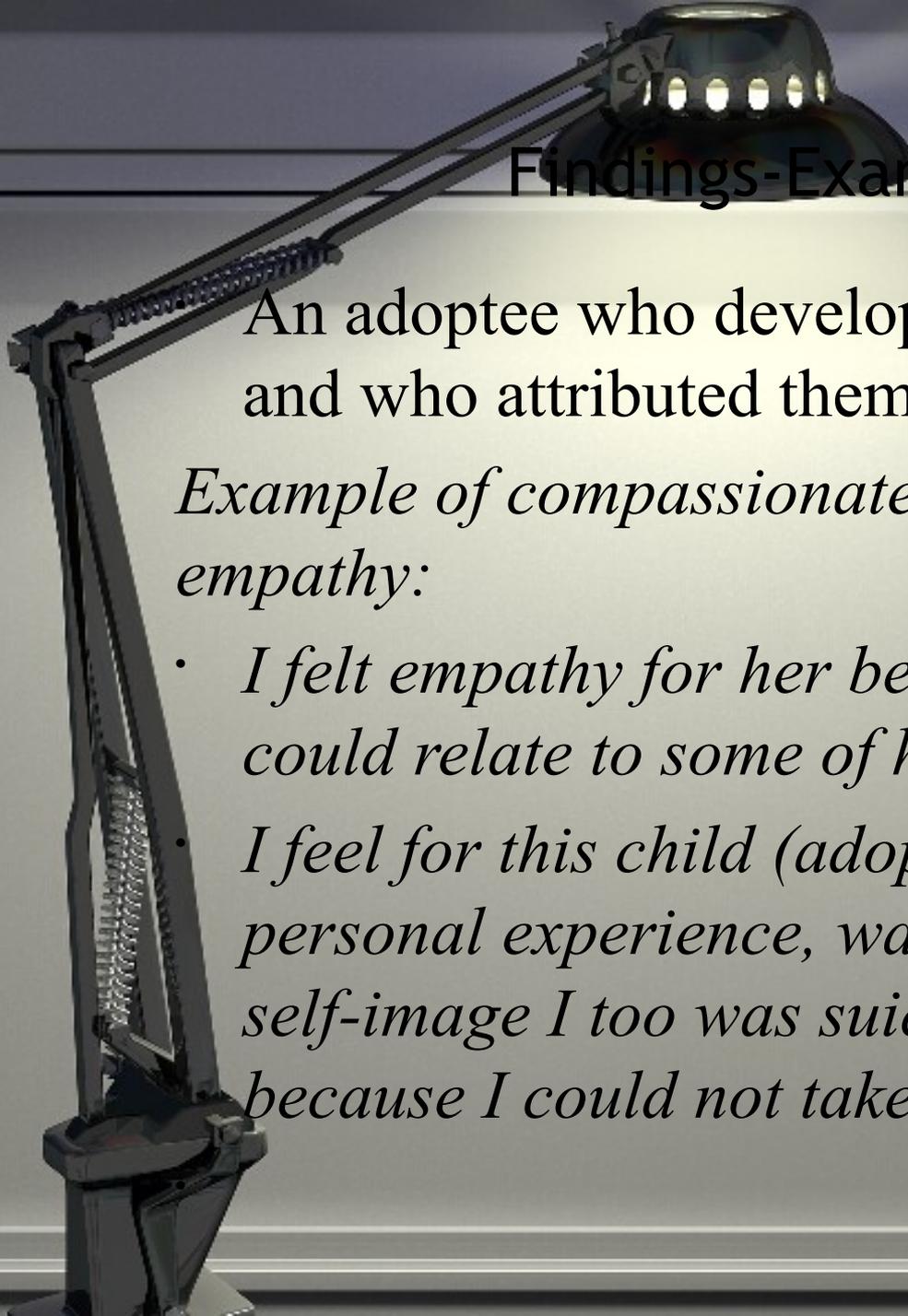
Findings-

Fast forward to the 2011 - same method- four vignettes-incl a cross-cultural adoption context.

However, the entire empathy workshop was shifted to WS2511- Values & Ethics.

Findings- what seemed evident is a need to do more work with students to ensure empathy goes beyond a definitional understanding

This is regardless of whether it is in Ethics or Skills Subjects.

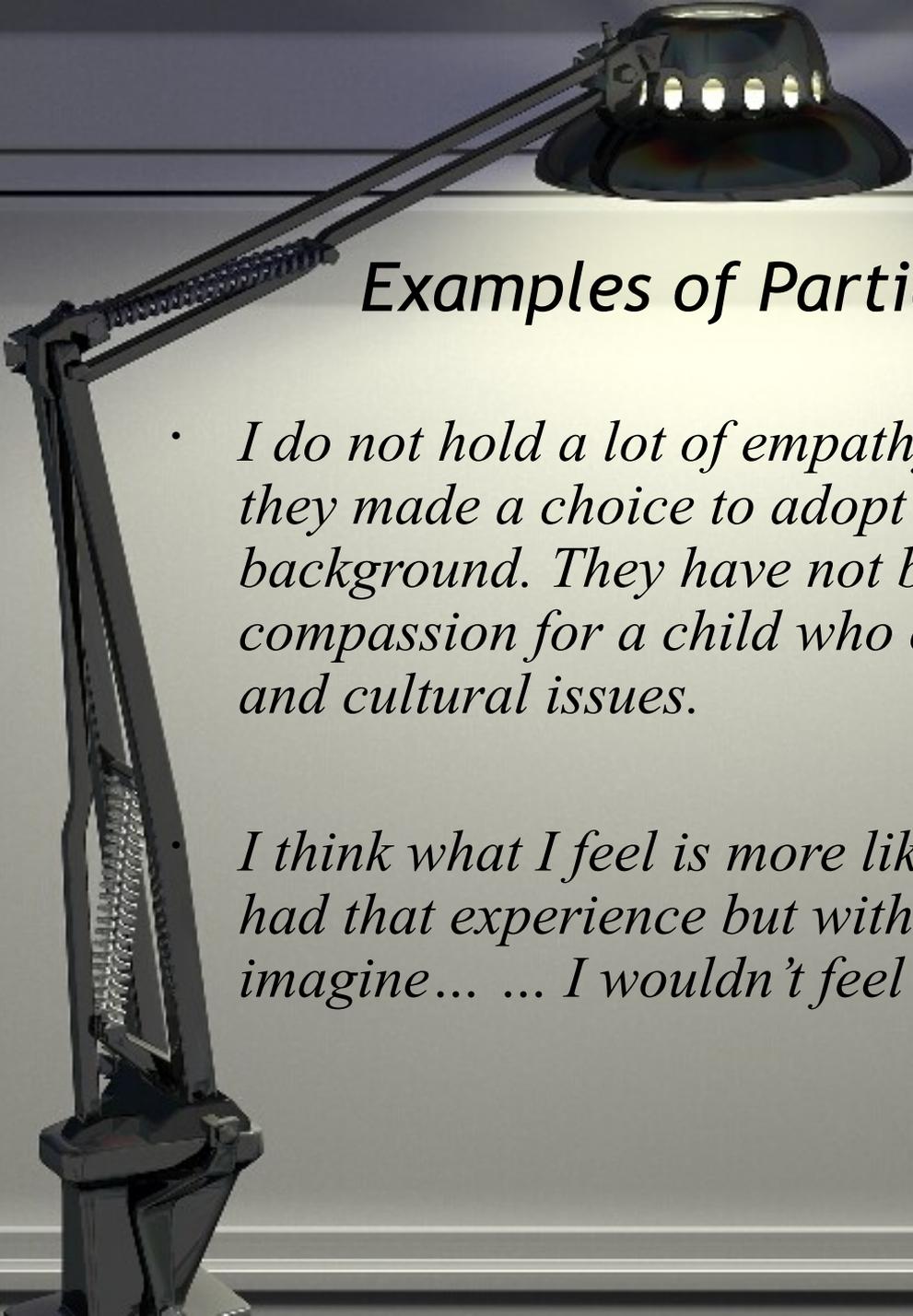


Findings-Examples of responses

An adoptee who developed cultural identity issues and who attributed them to the adoptive parents:

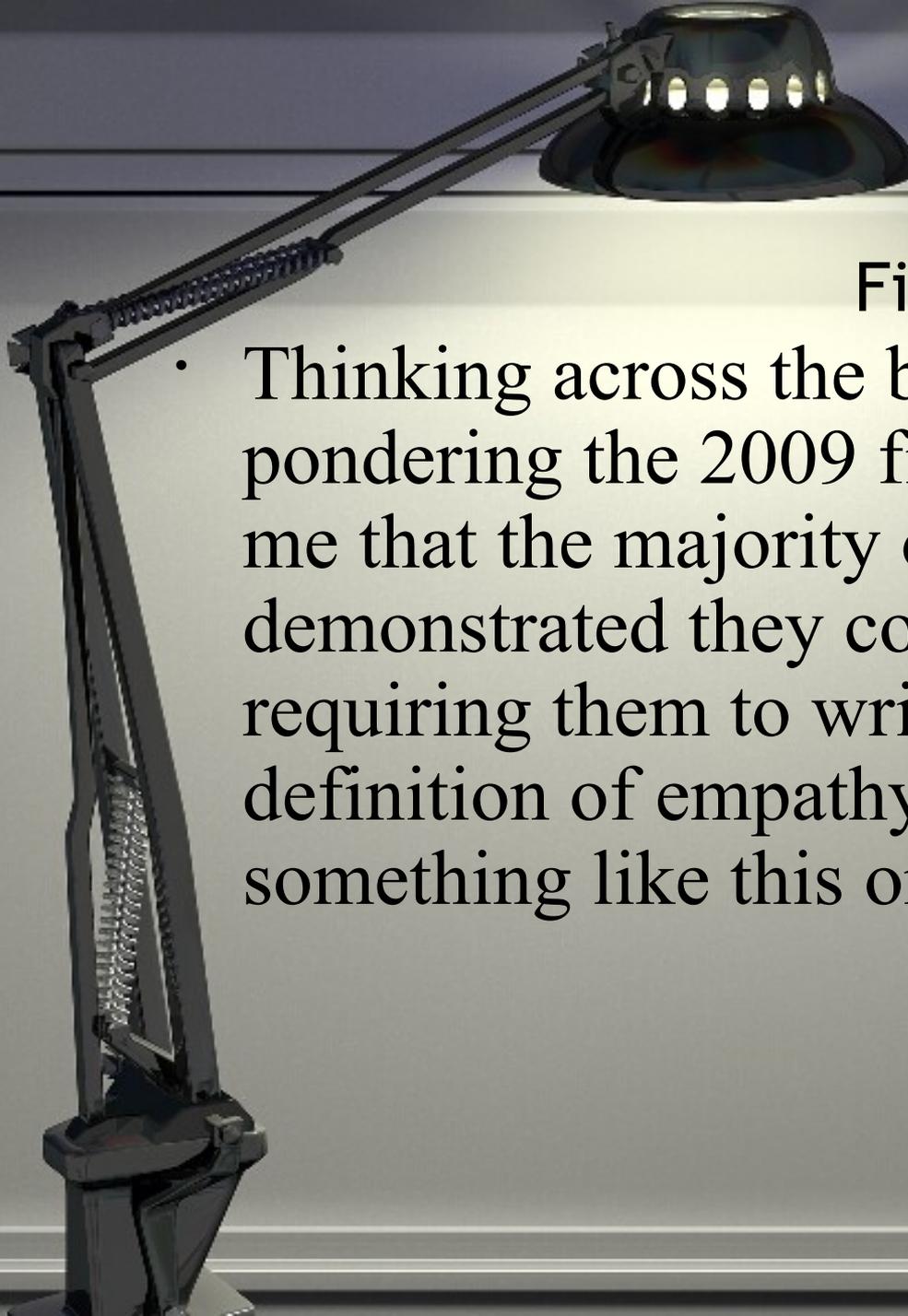
Example of compassionate and/or common wound empathy:

- *I felt empathy for her because she is hurting. I could relate to some of her experiences*
- *I feel for this child (adoptee) because I, from personal experience, was brought up as a negative self-image I too was suicidal, attempt at 13, because I could not take this negativity*



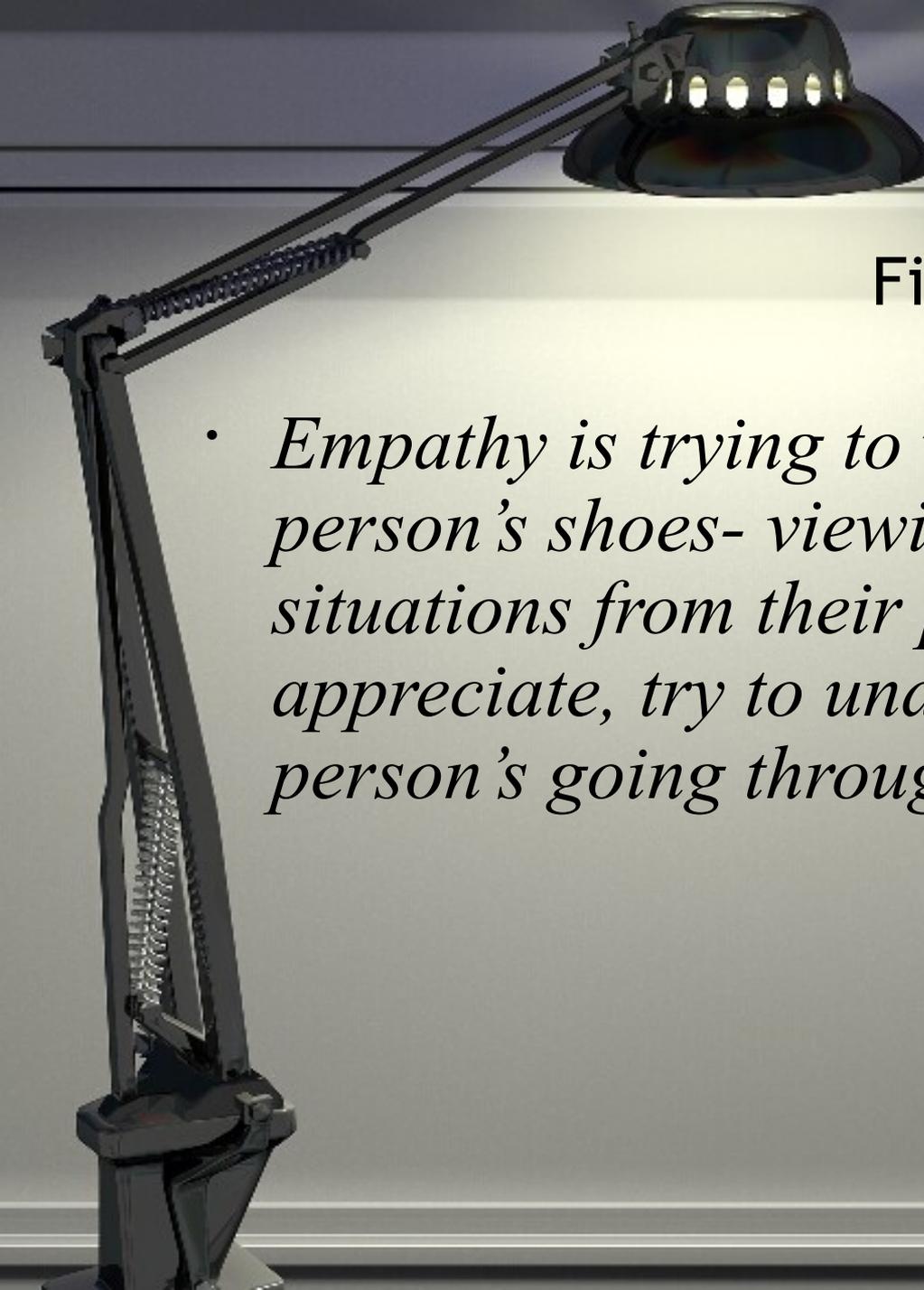
Examples of Partial or limited empathy

- *I do not hold a lot of empathy for the adoptive parents as they made a choice to adopt a child from a different cultural background. They have not been supportive or shown compassion for a child who clearly has mental health issues and cultural issues.*
- *I think what I feel is more like sympathy. I feel sorry that she had that experience but without more information I cannot imagine... .. I wouldn't feel empathy if I didn't believe it.*



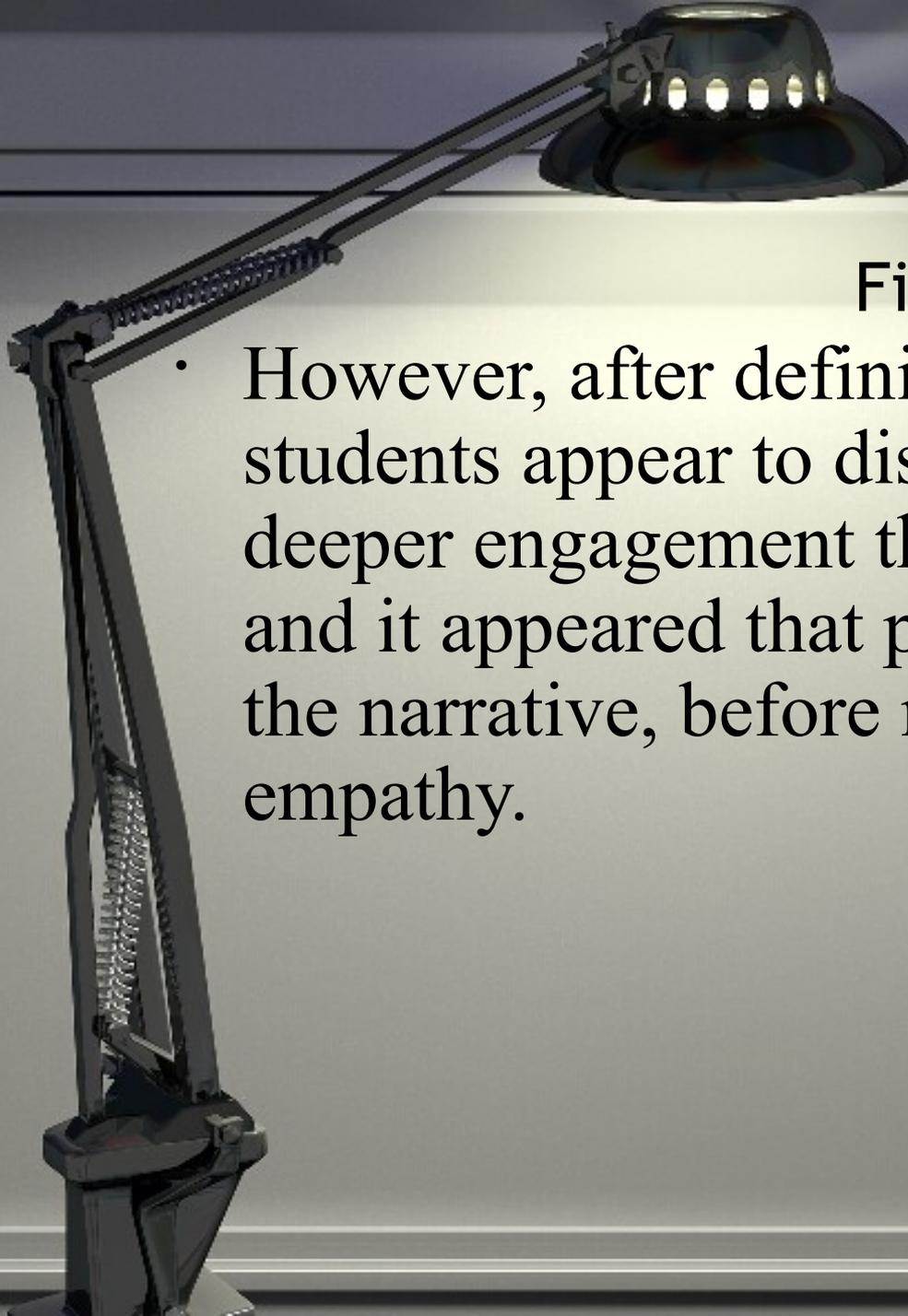
Findings-

- Thinking across the broader data, and pondering the 2009 findings, it occurred to me that the majority of students demonstrated they could respond to a task requiring them to write a meaningful definition of empathy. - many students wrote something like this one:



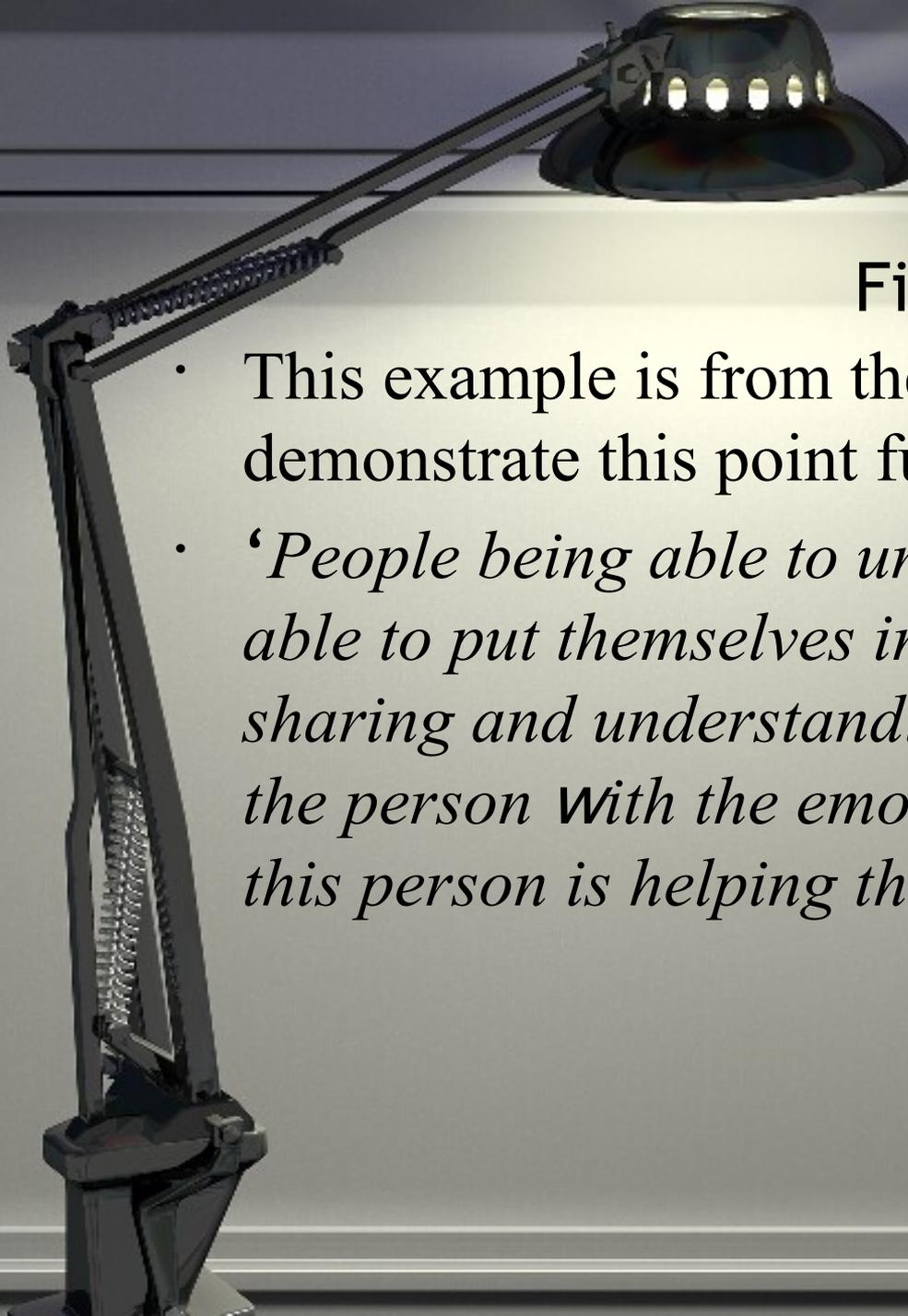
Findings-

- *Empathy is trying to walk a mile in another person's shoes- viewing the world, and situations from their perspective to fully appreciate, try to understand what the person's going through, feeling, experiencing*



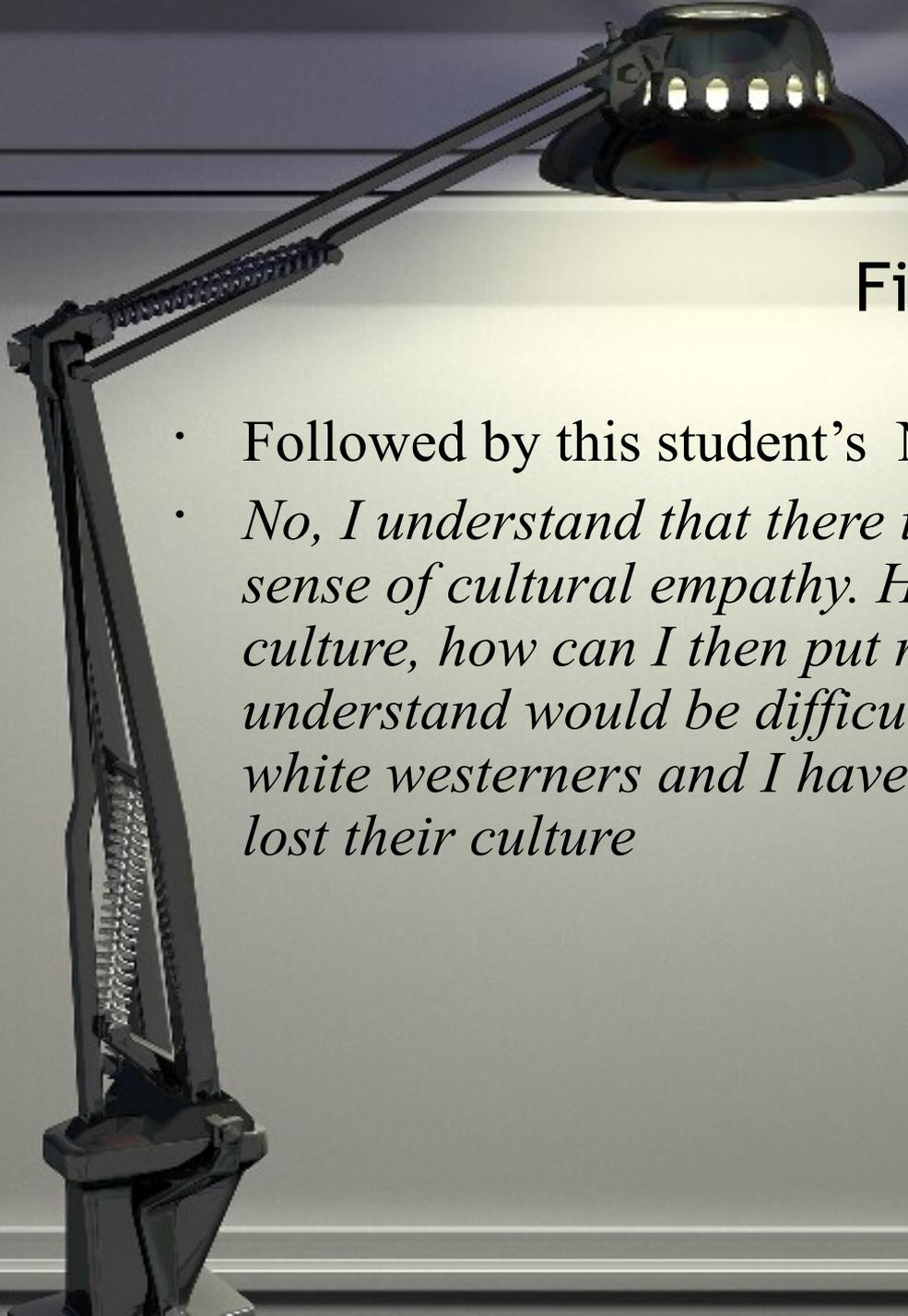
Findings-

- However, after defining empathy, some students appear to disconnect from the deeper engagement the definitions promised, and it appeared that perhaps they appraised the narrative, before moderating their empathy.



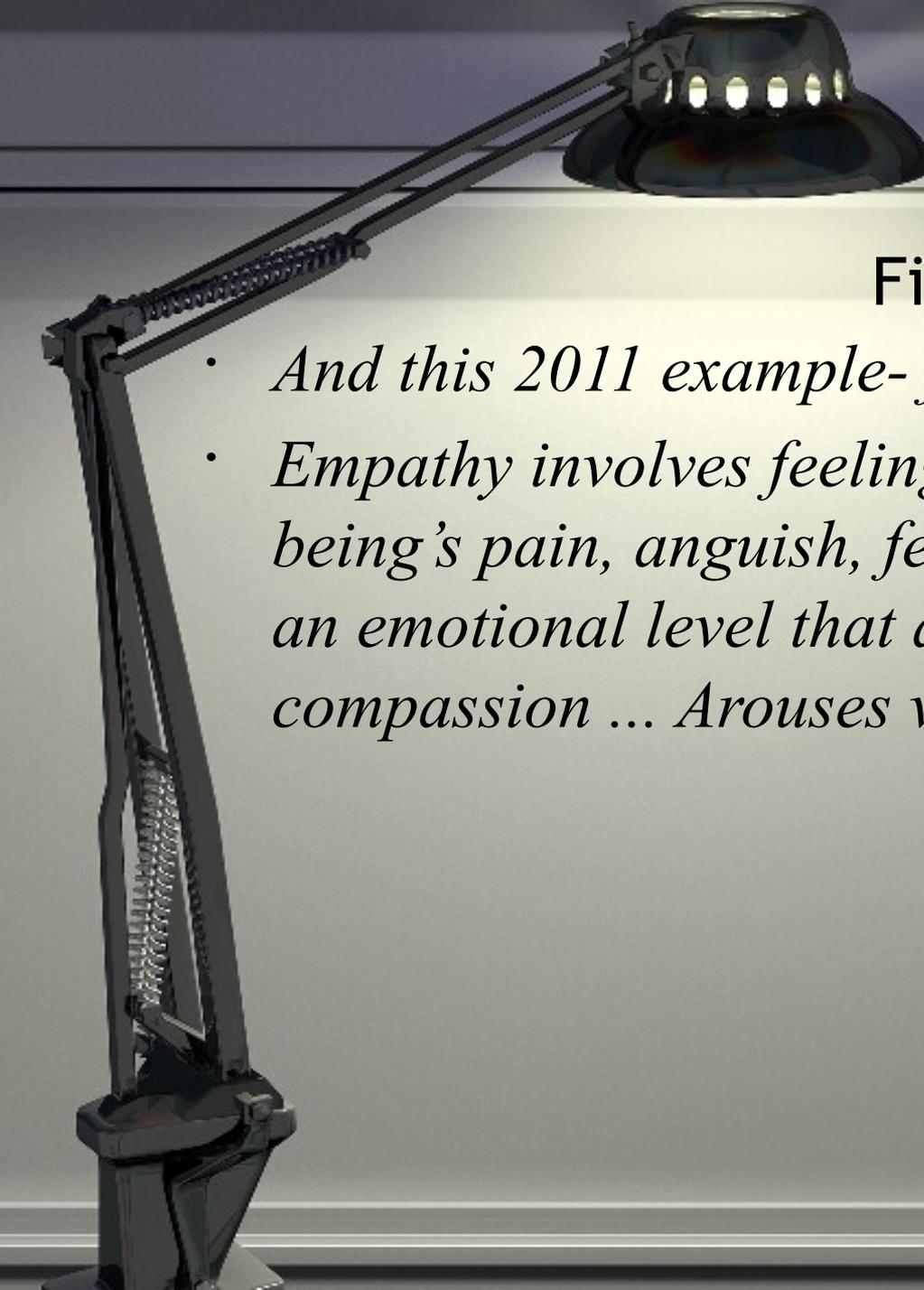
Findings-

- This example is from the 2009 project to demonstrate this point further; first their definition:
- *‘People being able to understand, share and being able to put themselves in that person’s shoes’. This sharing and understanding will help, and provide the person with the emotion and the feeling that this person is helping them*



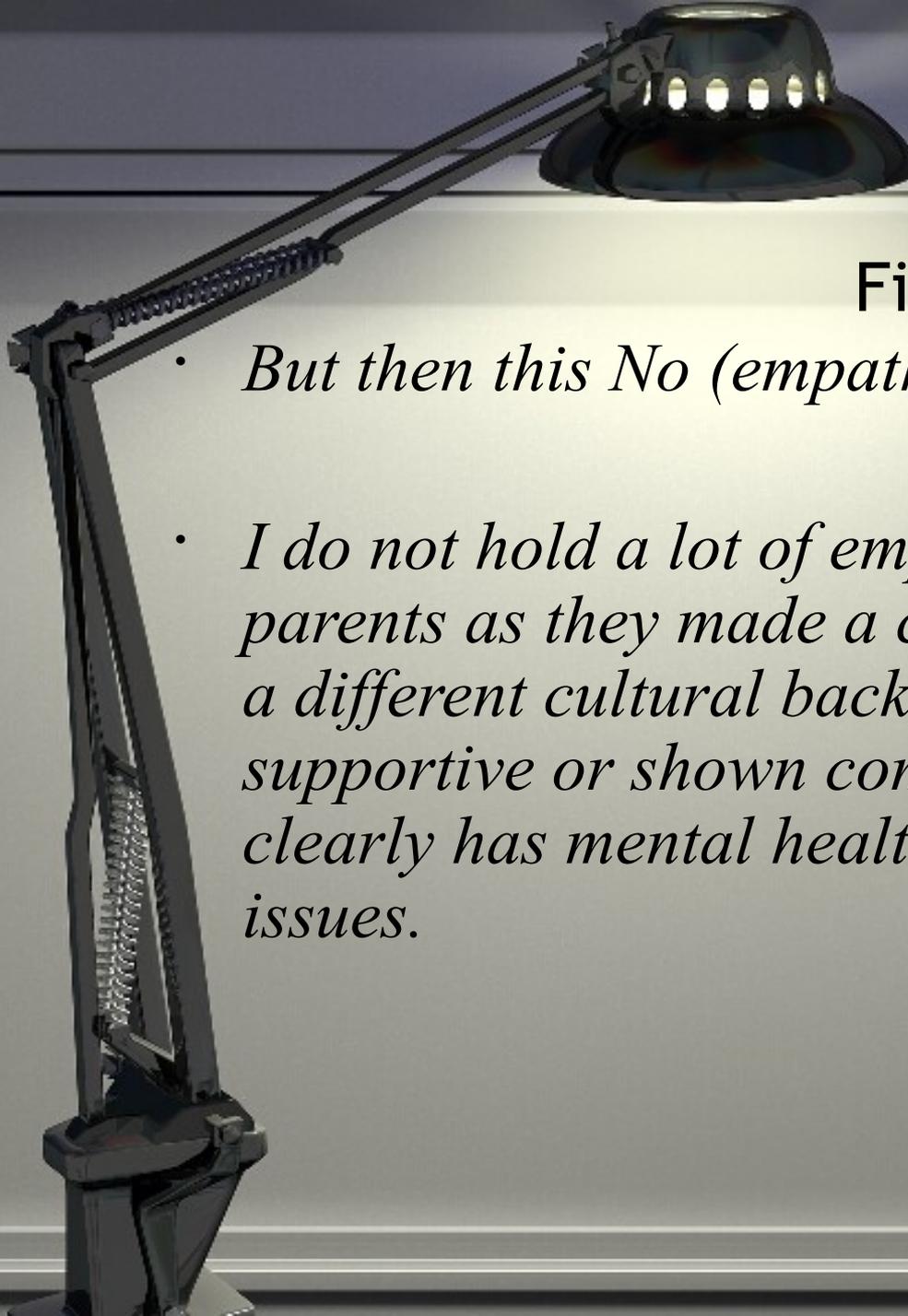
Findings-

- Followed by this student's No (empathy) response :
- *No, I understand that there is cultural awareness in the sense of cultural empathy. However I don't belong to that culture, how can I then put myself in their shoes, showing I understand would be difficult, I'm classed as one of those white westerners and I have never belonged to a culture that lost their culture*



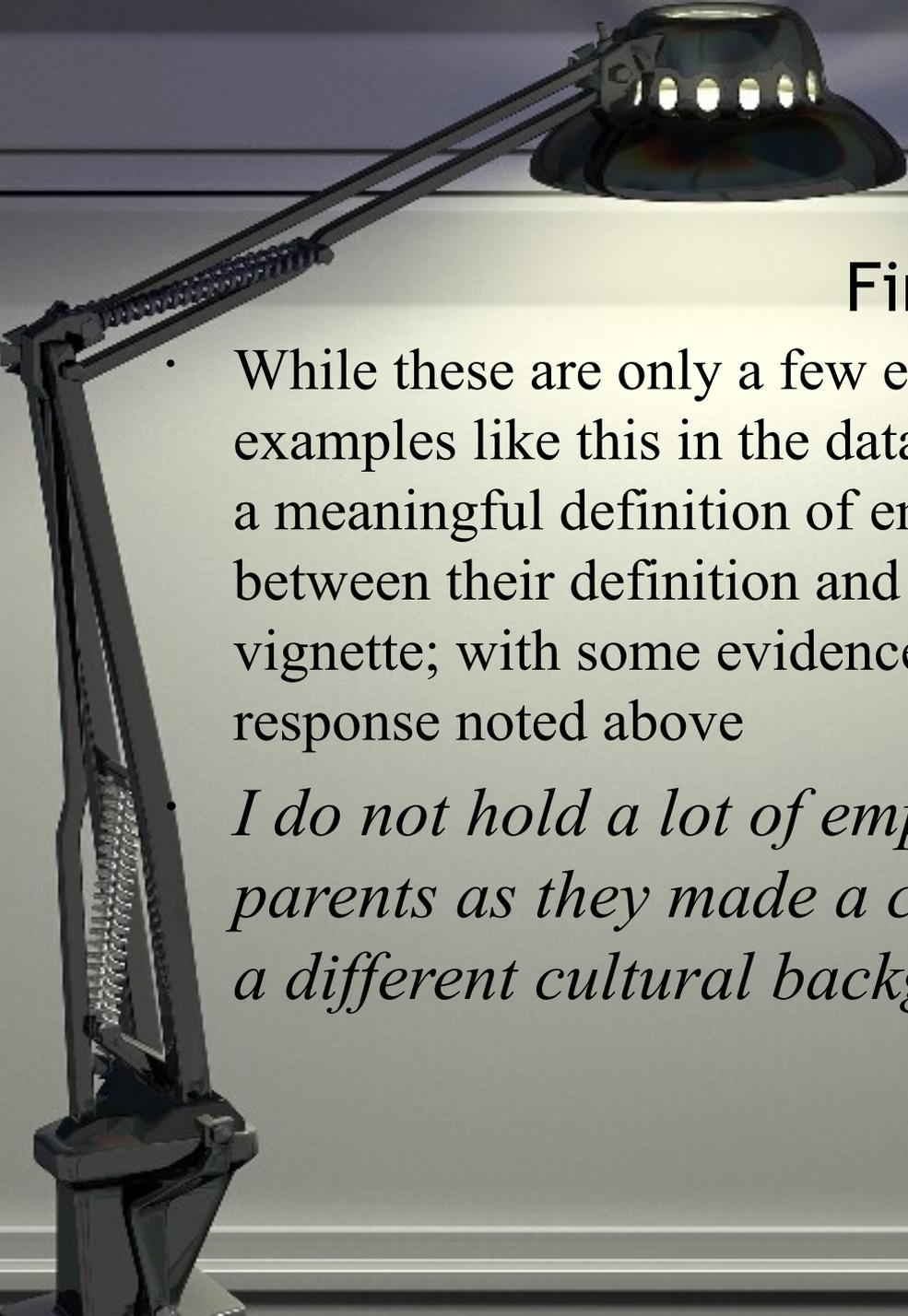
Findings-

- *And this 2011 example- first a definition:*
- *Empathy involves feeling another person's or living being's pain, anguish, fear, or loss. Connecting on an emotional level that arouses feelings of compassion ... Arouses very emotional feelings*



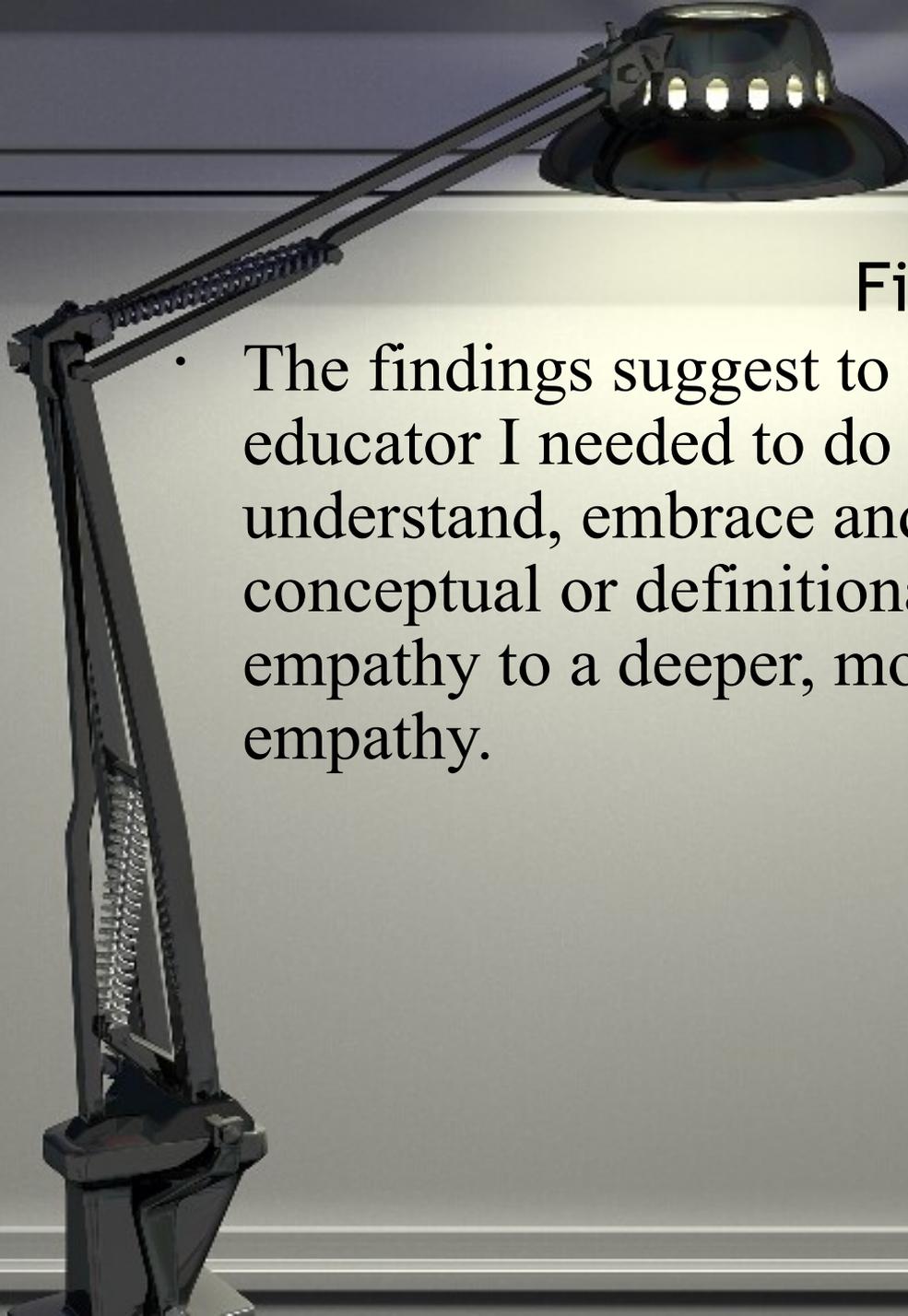
Findings-

- *But then this No (empathy) response:*
- *I do not hold a lot of empathy for the adoptive parents as they made a choice to adopt a child from a different cultural background. They have not been supportive or shown compassion for a child who clearly has mental health issues and cultural issues.*



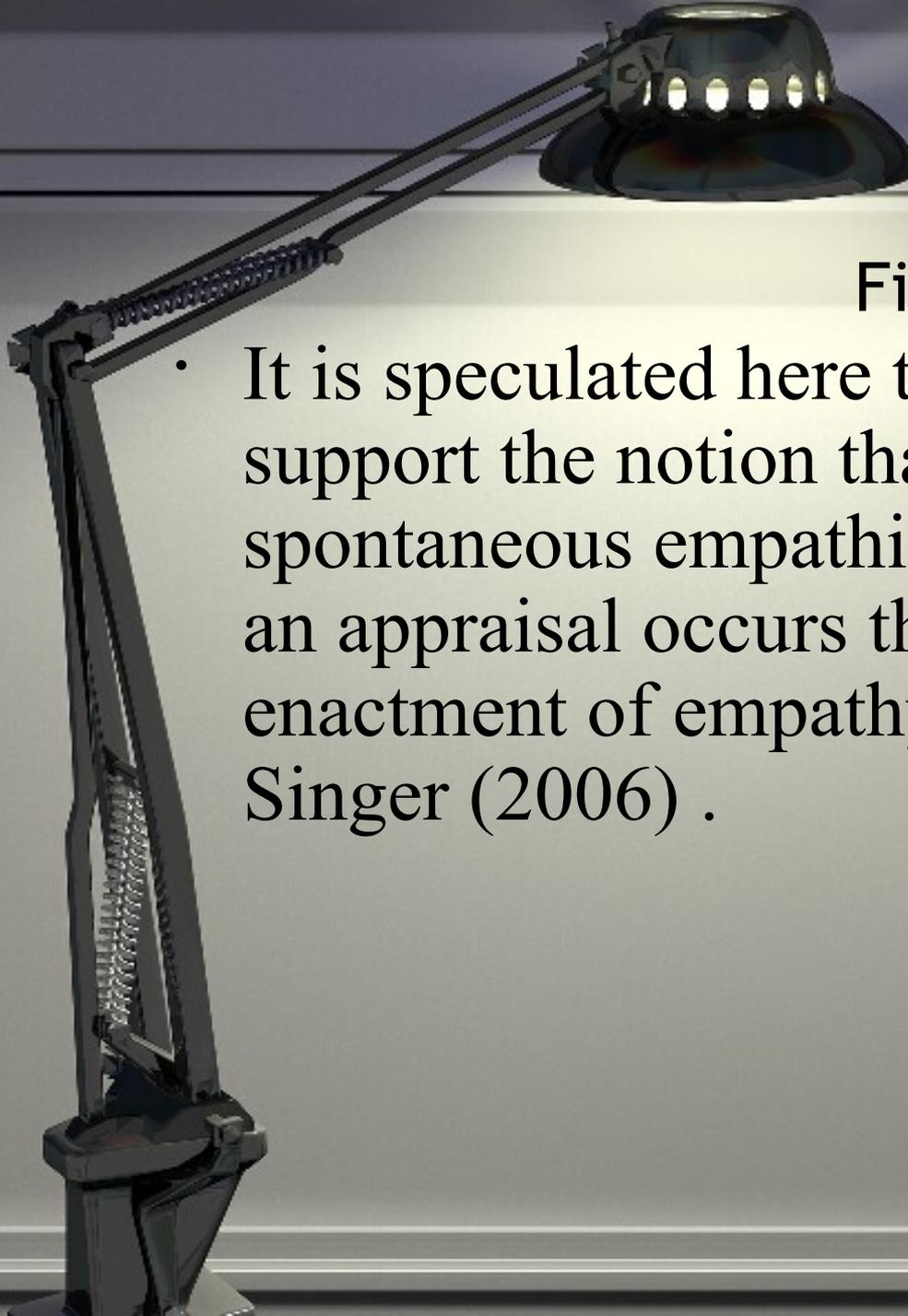
Findings-

- While these are only a few examples- there were many examples like this in the data-where students appear to give a meaningful definition of empathy but then reveal a ‘gap’ between their definition and their empathic response to a vignette; with some evidence of value judgments- eg this response noted above
- *I do not hold a lot of empathy for the adoptive parents as they made a choice to adopt a child from a different cultural background.*



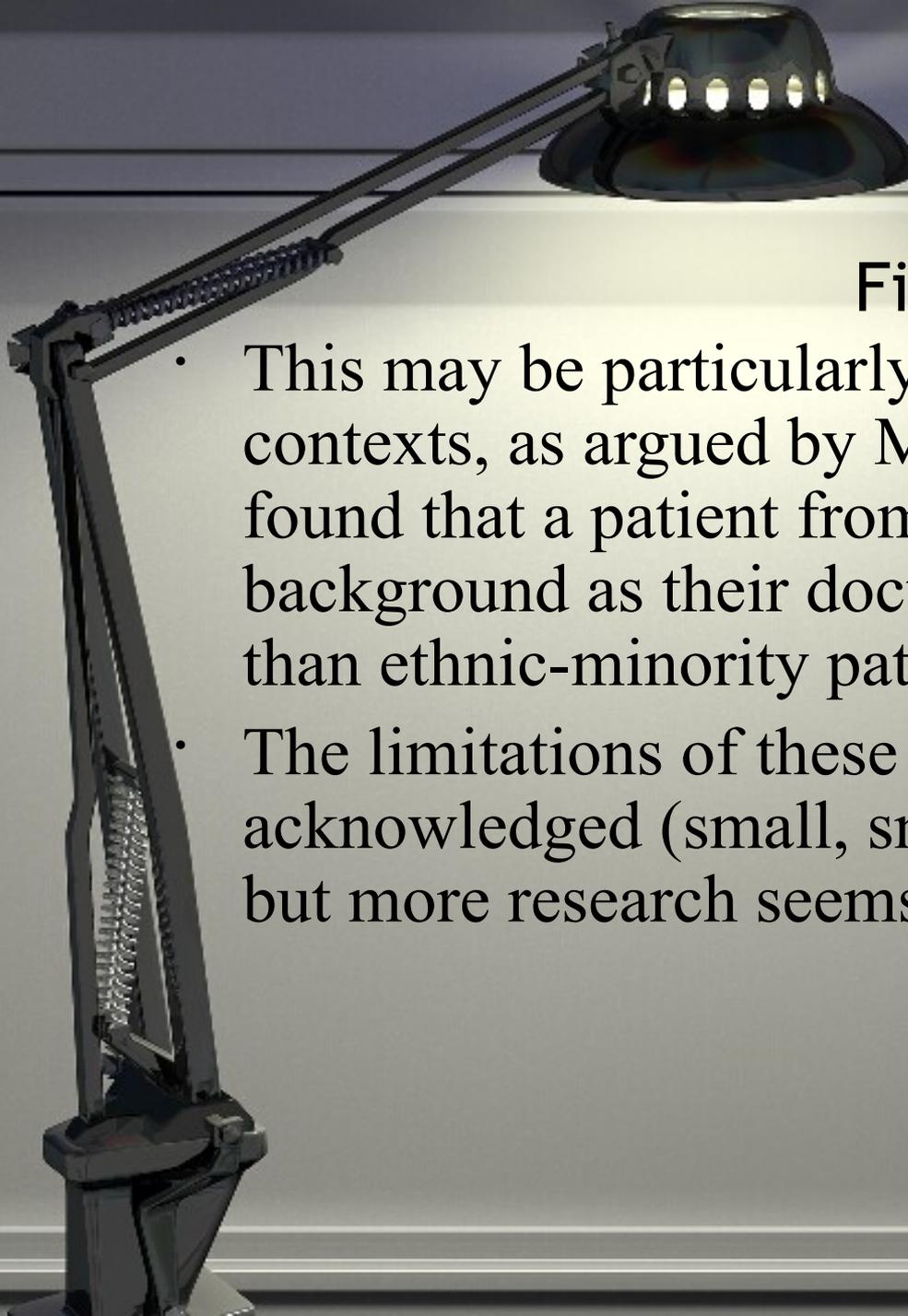
Findings-

- The findings suggest to me that as a social work educator I needed to do more- to help students understand, embrace and enact empathy beyond an conceptual or definitional understanding of empathy to a deeper, more heartfelt, genuine empathy.



Findings-

- It is speculated here that these findings support the notion that, rather than a spontaneous empathic emotional response, an appraisal occurs that influences students' enactment of empathy (De Vignemont & Singer (2006) .

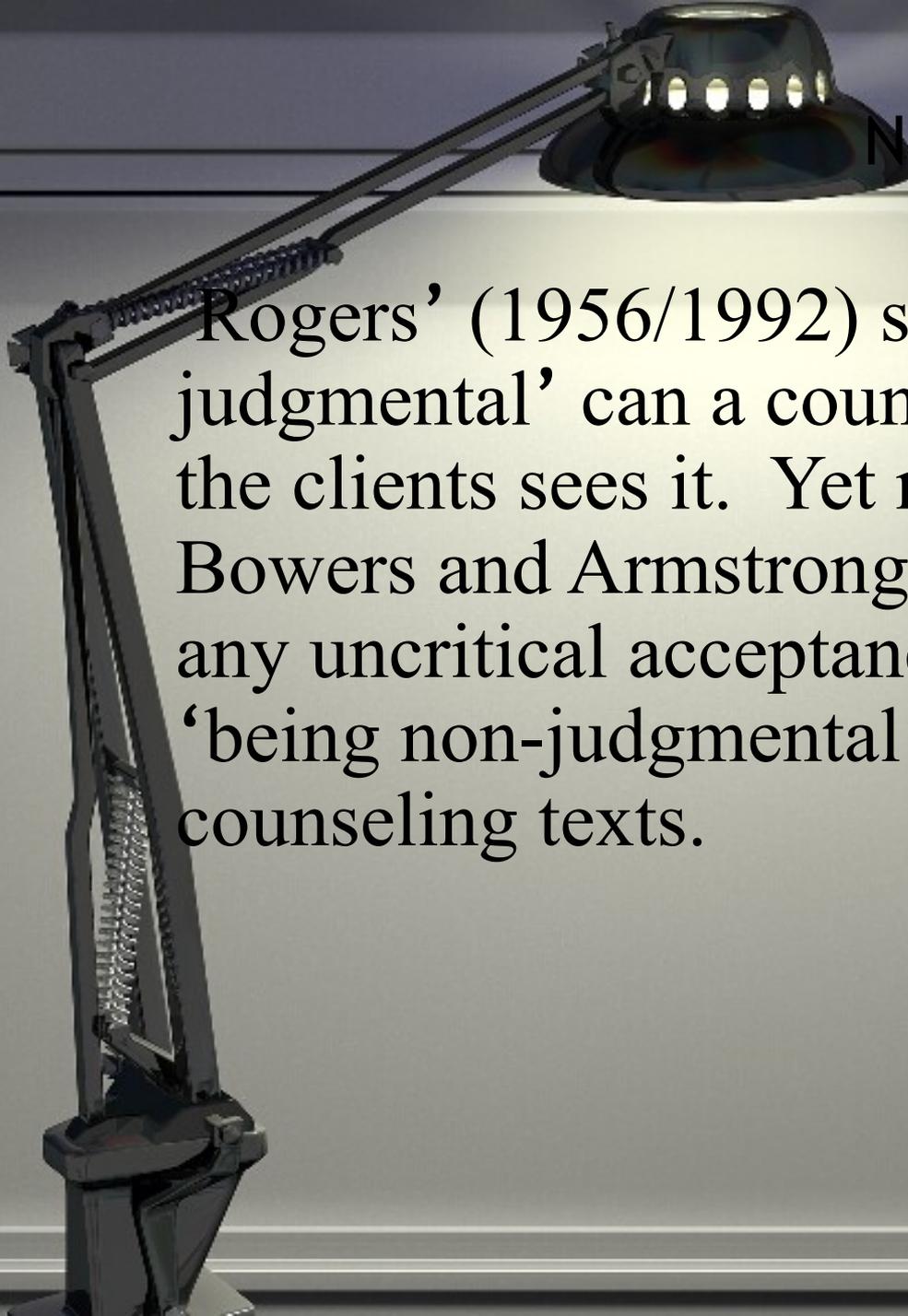


Findings-

- This may be particularly so in cross-cultural contexts, as argued by Meeuwesen (2006) who found that a patient from the same cultural background as their doctor received more empathy than ethnic-minority patients.
- The limitations of these small empathy projects are acknowledged (small, snapshot, classroom-based) but more research seems necessary.

Also acknowledged- Students were in 2nd year and by 4th year they may possess better mastery over empathy- But available literature suggests health and medical students' empathy decreases during their education, or at best, empathy levels are maintained but not increased by graduation (Quince, Parker, Wood and Benson, 2011).

- The same may or may not be true of Australian social work and welfare students. I would be interested to explore this further if others are interested.



Non-judgmental empathy-

Rogers' (1956/1992) says only by being 'non-judgmental' can a counsellor see the world as the clients sees it. Yet more recently Pelling, Bowers and Armstrong (2006, p.72) challenge any uncritical acceptance of the notion of 'being non-judgmental' as identified in counseling texts.

- Taylor and White (2006, p.941), and others, agree that while it is rarely acknowledged in textbooks, ‘judging the moral adequacy and worthiness of service users is a key element in social work assessment’.

Taylor & White (2006) argue that current economic rationalist focus on risks & efficiencies in service delivery may propel practitioners towards making more, increasingly poor and premature judgments about families they are working with.

- They also argue that making judgments about another person's relationships and character often relies on 'culturally-shared common sense' (p.940).

Scanlon (2008) recommends explicit debate on what constitutes a ‘non-judgmental’ response, rather than educators requiring students to take up a ‘non-judgmental’ standpoint -without ever having engaged with them in meaningful debate around this concept.

- Recommended here:
- Facilitating students' deeper empathy skills to reduce any 'empathy gap'; with parallel discussion and reflection on cultural in-group preferences and judgments that may influence giving empathy.
- It may be particularly important for non-Indigenous Australians working with Aboriginal Australians, and for working across ethnic minority group contexts that deeper empathy skills are gained

Thank you for your interest - (Refs)

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