

Impressions of an International Social Work Placement in an Indian School in Dubai

'A journey begins before the traveller departs' (Charmaz, 2006)

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Abstract:

This paper accounts the development of our propositions and a grounded theory in the wake of an international field placement of an Australian university master's qualifying student of social work, in an Indian private school in Dubai. We define the components of this journey that allowed a constructive involvement in the cross cultural milieu. We undertook relevant comparative method advancing and testing the efficacy of relevant theoretical developments; conducting literature reviews and finally the process of conducting action research that allowed for testing beliefs and impressions in a systematic way (Glaser, 1978; Strauss, 1987). A school social work placement has all the action which brings the notions of human agency and the emergent processes. It provides opportunities to attempt problem solving approaches and allows researchers to keep an open ended approach to the study of action. The association of reflective practice throughout the placement allowed the authors to add 'new pieces to the research puzzle or conjure entire new puzzles' during the data collection, thus gaining a clear focus on what is happening in the data without sacrificing the detail of the what is being enacted (Charmaz, 2006). This article additionally provides a reflection on the sensitivities of international social work practice in the context of striving for cultural competence whilst providing robust critical analysis.

Keywords: School social work, Grounded theory, Action research, Qualitative research, Cultural competence

An indirect practicum involving an Australian Masters of Social Work (professional qualifying) student (the first author) in an Indian school in Dubai (the school), with an Australian Indian mentor (the principal supervisor), provides an environment for a very unique

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creation and sharing of knowledge that can be of benefit to any other than those school social workers practicing in a similar context. To the contrary, the knowledge sharing opportunities are possibly broader primarily due to its very nature of being a placement at the confluence of varied factors;

- for researchers, a social work practicum that creates an ideal environment in which to explore the meeting of two seemingly conflicting imperatives of cultural competence and rigorous research and critical reflection;
- for sociological research in general, the situation of applying constructionist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006) in a time limited practicum, within the context of power differentials and the resultant hesitancy inherent in the student/practicum agency relationship;
- for the social work association guiding practicum requirements, the implications of these requirements in an international social work placement, where social work practices and values are not universal; and
- for school social work, where stigma and the incumbent student resistance impedes the ability of social workers to practice for optimal outcomes.

Each of these possibilities for contributing to the expansion of the relevant bodies of knowledge has encouraged the authors to develop an account of the practicum and research process.

Grounded Theory

Upon commencement of the practicum and continued throughout, the approach of the researcher, under the guidance of her mentor, was to gain familiarity with the philosophies, values, practices and priorities guiding school social work in the school. Through this process and in consultation with the field educators and mentor, the broad parameters of a research project were mapped out. Planning, a literature review and further refinement of the research questions was followed by the preparation for focus groups to be conducted

established were to seek participant understanding of a strengths based practice (SBP) approach in one-to-one counselling, explore the current view of the school social work role and the expectations of that role.

In the early stages of planning the researcher raised the query to her mentor, “do we need to prepare for the possibility that nothing meaningful will arise from the research?” As the process unfolded she learned that this is one of the main tenets of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). It is about letting the data provide the direction (Glaser, 1992), in some ways like the less directive nature of strengths based practice that the research was intended to explore within the research environment. The subjects of the research collectively reveal what is to be found and it emerges from their perspective (Glaser, 1992). Ultimately, the data to some degree led the researcher away from the response to the understanding of a strengths approach in a school setting, and instead became more focused on the school social work role. The short presentation and role play demonstrating the efficacy of SBP, limited due to the time constraints of the practicum, meant that participants could only give their views based on that brief exposure. As a result, focus group discussions continuously returned to matters of priority to the participants in relation to the role of the school social worker.

Regardless of the gradual deviation from the focus on the research focus regarding SBP, the execution of focus groups remained firmly grounded in the principles of SBP. A thorough understanding by the researcher of the key principles of the approach was required. As previously mentioned, the focus groups included an explanation and group discussion regarding SBP principles (Pulla, 2012; Saleebey, 1992) and a demonstration of those principles via a role play. The researcher also attempted to demonstrate SBP principles in her engagement with the groups, and during the collation, coding, analysis and reporting of the outcomes. The researcher found applying SBP principles such as breaking down any power imbalances, and being collaborative, to be the most helpful and effective strategies in the focus group environment. The parents and most of the students appeared to feel free to discuss their opinions openly and honestly

discussions.

Also important in the researcher's approach as the focus group moderator was to demonstrate non-judgement by listening to each contribution openly without defending a particular point of view. If the researcher saw an interpretation of SBP to be not what she intended to convey, she acknowledged and validated the participant's view. After all views were collected on the particular issue being discussed, the researcher clarified points that had not been explained sufficiently so that further views could be sought based on that new deeper understanding. This combination of non-directive validation followed by clarification and information delivery, allowed the researcher to maintain her focus on action research whilst ensuring that focus groups maintained direction and purpose in accordance with the ultimate intention of grounded theory research; to deliver data that as accurately as possible, reflects the perspective of the research participants.

Prior to and throughout the initial stages of data collection in the focus groups, the researcher engaged in many informal discussions with school counsellors employed in the school, some of whom were qualified social workers, and also conducted a small amount of direct practice herself in one-to-one counselling and larger scale preventive functions of the school social work role. In this process it became clear that the research would benefit from a more formal exposure to the views of the counsellors and so preparations were made to conduct a small number of counsellor interviews to add to the research data.

The practicum environment provides an ideal location in which to reassess and adjust the approach along the way. Interviews with counsellors may seem an obvious omission to the experienced, or inexperienced, researcher, however in the rich context of learning that a practicum provides, the student has the freedom to stumble along the way towards efficacy. Grounded theory in a more sophisticated and systematic way does this deliberately through theoretical sampling to reassess and redefine research parameters (Glaser, 1992). Furthermore this strategy employed by grounded

theory and collection activities to deepen and broaden understanding of that which is being studied (Charmaz 2006).

The commitment of the researcher and the mentor to an action research approach, and allowing for the impact of research subjects to influence an evolving research process, was a dominant idea for further exploration. As discussed, the researcher was led by the participants to focus more on the school social worker role than their response to the SBP approach demonstrated. Furthermore the dominance of some participants over others had an impact on the content and extent of sharing and free expression within the focus groups. Regardless of the competence of the moderators to ensure full participation, unspoken influences, obligations and roles seemed to influence the level of participation and the depth of contributions. Although this type of inhibitory influence may be undesirable in the interests of collecting thorough and accurate data, it did provide some information about the nature of power relationships and implicit roles within social engagements amongst the participants. The impact of these factors also precipitated the generation of strategies to mitigate such influences in future where research scope may allow for a more comprehensive approach.

Likewise, reflecting on the simultaneous construction that a cross cultural researcher (or any researcher) imposes simply by their presence within the research environment (Charmaz, 2006), allows for an in-depth consideration of the challenges attendant to cross cultural qualitative research. In many qualitative research approaches, the intent is for the researcher to be the objective observer, gathering factual data. Conversely, Charmaz (2006, p. 10) qualifies her research with the acknowledgement that "any theoretical rendering offers an interpretive portrayal of the studied world, not an exact picture". One step further, Fogel & Osborne (2011) in their critique of the limitations of constructivist and positivist grounded theory, suggest that beyond a constructive approach, more reflexive research strategies must be employed to fully acknowledge and respond to, the influence and non-objectivity of researchers. Influence can be found in all aspects of the research approach, including interaction with participants in

loss of meaning inevitable in the transcription of audio files and the impact of a co-moderator being present (Fogel & Osborne, 2011). This paper accounts for an attempt at a more reflexive approach to grounded theory by making the role of the researcher and other "mediators" (p. 11) more transparent.

The self-reflection involved in the process of striving for cultural competence and in the learning focus of a practicum arrangement, creates an ideal foundation for reflexive practice in the process of doing research. The researcher explicitly acknowledged to participants that she would be unable to divorce her own world view from the outcomes of the research regardless of her attempts to do so and welcomed discussion around this idea. She also engaged in candid conversations with her co-moderators to seek their views on her effectiveness, influence and objectivity in the focus groups, and their interpretations of the data collected and codes allocated. Although these attempts to make transparent the constructive nature of the research being conducted were quite superficial, it did provide an opportunity for the researcher to reflect on more comprehensive ways of operating more reflexively in future research.

In spite of Fogel and Osborne's (2011) critique, the application of grounded theory, being an "inductive, iterative, interactive and comparative" process (Thornberg & Charmaz, 2011, p. 41), requires constant reflection and reassessment. The time limited nature of a social work practicum, in this case, an indirect practicum focussed on research, requires that the whole practicum process be completed within 490 hours. The researcher and her mentor found that these competing pressures created a unique motivator for an intense focus on constant self-reflection, timely collaborations, regular teleconferences, and highly concentrated planning and preparation. On reflection of substantially more thorough grounded theory applications (Khaw, 2012) and collaborative partnerships (Pieters & Dornig, 2013), it seemed that this brief foray into the arena of emergence and construction was insignificant. However, at least for the researcher, it was an invaluable glimpse at the simultaneously cumbersome and thrilling journey that qualitative research and grounded theory offers.

Researcher and the mentor was clear, from the practicum agency, a genuine openness to, and support for the research, and a willingness to facilitate the process of data collection, ultimately determined the feasibility of the research being possible at all. Without the support of these factors, a research focussed practicum based around grounded theory principles may not be possible. In itself, coding and analysis of the counsellor interviews and the writing of the research report for this practicum went beyond the allocated hours. In a similar situation, without the same level of participation and facilitation from the mentor and the practicum agency, it is possible that data collection, transcription, multi-level coding and analysis within grounded theory methodology would not be completed.

The coding process is very labour intensive, especially when doing it manually, even when the sample size is relatively small. In her initial review of the data, the researcher employed initial coding and incorporated some InVivo coding to preserve participant terminology (Saldana, 2009). This approach allowed the researcher to keep intact the original language used within the focus groups to facilitate meaningful and thorough post group consultations with her co-moderators to verify interpretations and assumptions being made during the coding process. The coding method employed allowed the data to dictate the direction of the coding. After a general sense of the data was developed, patterns and the beginnings of theory began to emerge via a constant comparative method of moving back and forward between the initial coding and focused coding (Charmaz, 2000). The focused coding is a secondary but parallel process that is driven by the primary interpretation and analysis of what is emerging from the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). From a theoretical perspective this comparative method ensured the full content of the data maintained its position at the centre of the analysis. From a practice point of view it inspired forward movement during what can be a cumbersome process, as a higher level perspective was becoming visible to the researcher whilst being immersed in the detail of the data.

Also occurring in parallel was some theoretical coding, where relationships were interpreted to exist between codes and categories

by students in relation to being associated with the school counsellor, their resistance to approach or express themselves openly to the counsellor, and the perception of questionable confidentiality or discretion by the counsellors. This sensitising concept (Blumer, 1969), where an idea is suggested without claiming to be truth, began from individual focus group participants indicating a causality between stigma and student resistance, and grew as more participants in that and other focus groups discussed similar concepts and brought in the notion of confidentiality. The linkages between the three elements became clearer and theoretical codes were the result.

From the beginning of the literature review and throughout the data collection, transcription and the multi-level coding process, memos were written by the researcher to capture thoughts, questions or ideas which would be later pooled, considered, compared and consolidated to initiate and facilitate the report writing phase (Thornberg & Charmaz, 2011). The memos allowed the researcher to begin conceptualising within the flow of the research process, further enhancing the power of the data to be drawn out and represented accurately in the final research report.

For this paper the research and mentor adopted the following from Pulla (2012) to describe the efficacy of the school social worker in a school setting.

- Every individual student is capable of displaying his strengths.
- Every student is capable of identifying resources, display knowledge, talents, capacities, skills, and resources to mobilize in order to pursue aspirations.
- Students who face adversity typically develop ideas, capacities, and strategies that also serve them.
- School counseling and social work must recognise this adversity as an opportunity to make resiliency work.
- Despite the knowledge that the students may not be mature enough to know what is best for them, School social work and counseling requires practice of a non-judgemental attitude.

with the opportunity to share his story.

- The overall goal of school social work is to see transformation, regeneration, and resilience.
- School social work gains respect and productive relationship through mingling, connection and affection, rather than through overt or covert controls.

On reflection of these, the primary outcomes of the research project provided an interpretation of the existing strengths and resources available to the school counsellors, some challenges and limitations they face in applying them, and the participants' understanding and views of SBP. The process of appreciative inquiry (Pulla, 2011) which via the research approach employed, was begun, allows for the identification and exploration of what the school counsellors are doing well as the basis for developing improvements. This switch in focus from the more traditional approach of responding directly to problems and challenges, allows an organisation to help increase stakeholder investment and utilization (Pulla, 2011, p. 3). In other words, when people are asked to reflect on and explore what they are doing well, it helps to encourage and further mobilise those strengths, attributes or resources to leverage existing momentum to move the organisation further towards its goals.

Striving for Cultural Competence

As a research based placement, the researcher was required to qualitatively gather and collate the views of students, parents and counsellors. During this process the researcher's perspective of respectful observer necessarily shifted. Her role became blurred as she tentatively stepped into areas of critical reflection and analysis, and to some degree, advocacy for students and parents as she gained a better understanding of their expectations of the school social work role. Even the researcher's rationalisation of considering the social work role in the context of the school's stated intentions through various motherhood statements guiding operations, became

to some degree immersed within the Indian culture, and what she was able to acquire from the academic literature in relation to Indian social work (Anand, 2010; Verma, Sharma & Larson, 2002; Nagpaul, 1993; & Arulmani, 2007).

The documentation of the research outcomes via a number of papers and a presentation, depending on the audience, sought to either provide a high level overview of the implications for school social work in general, or more specific agency focussed possibilities for responding to those implications. The researcher attempted to develop those implications or possibilities, which in many ways read as recommendations, in a way that demonstrated a position of respect and humility. That tentative approach that many striving for cultural competence employ to ensure sensitivity (Dean, 2001), was met with a request from the field educator for more explicit and direct feedback to ensure that meaningful considerations could be made at the organisational level to develop improvements. This encouraged the researcher to reflect that a more even balance between the hesitancy of cultural sensitivity and the acknowledged naivety of overt and sometimes clumsy pursuit of learning would be of benefit. Sometimes one needs to step outside that which is comfortable to risk measurable consequences in pursuit of a deeper and richer experience and a more comprehensive learning opportunity.

The researcher found herself to be inspired by the dedication and authenticity of the school counsellors, and intrigued by the elements of resilience and expectancy that were being incorporated into more traditional approaches such as Cognitive Behaviour Therapy and Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy. An interesting revelation that arose from the interviews with counsellors was that many, if not all of the counsellors, are applying some aspects of strengths based practice. The researcher's initial impression due to pressure on academic performance, common within the Indian culture (Verma, Sharma & Larson, 2002), was that school counselling in at least this Indian school context, is more of a therapist-led activity, where improved study habits and optimal learning techniques are focussed

experience of the western tendency towards political correctness and tactful mistruths or omissions to protect egos, suggested that strengths based principles were not prominent. The careful use of language to support the development of deeply rooted hope and resilience (Pulla & Mariscal, 2013), seems to be at odds with the very direct, honest, and vibrant qualities possessed by many people of Indian origin. However, after further exploration it was found that many principles of strengths based practice are being implemented by the Indian School counsellors in their engagement with students.

The researcher witnessed and heard accounts of counsellors seeking to identify and build on strengths so that the student's energy could be focussed towards activities that develop confidence and mastery in specific activities. This focus was engaged with the intention that this would germinate more positive behaviours in other areas. The researcher also explored with one counsellor her practice of ignoring established diagnostic labels given children to facilitate an engagement that wasn't predetermined by established limits and hindrances. Those are specific examples, however in many conversations with counsellors, the researcher found that in many ways counsellors are collaborating with students, working with them to explore and engage with identified strengths and encouraging them to introspect and seek understanding and solutions from within.

This prevalence of strengths based principles in the school counselling role, is however embedded within a cultural environment that does not necessarily comply with the broader application of established SBP practices. Power and hierarchy are tools which are used extensively by teachers and counsellors to manage behaviour within the school environment and whilst counsellors often use positive language very deliberately to encourage positive behaviour, very direct and often labelling language seems to be the more powerful influence in the school as a whole.

The making of these observations formed the foundation of the internal struggles the researcher felt as she strived to maintain a perspective of openness and non-judgement. Throughout the

be present (Evans, Seem & Kincade, 2001). The implications of her representing a western culture that is a derivative of a culture that has a history of colonial rule over Indian society, made her vigilant of her own thought processes and assessments in relation to critically reviewing that which she was observing.

The role of a student on an international placement in a culture diverse from their own is not entirely clear. Guidance is provided in relation to the challenges of establishing the placement and expectations of the prospective student (Cleak & Wilson, 2007) and conditions for compliance with Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) guidelines (AASW, 2012). However, advice in relation to the challenges students face in the process of responding to accreditation requirements such as satisfaction of the learning goals is not provided. One example of these learning goals is the requirement to review, critique and suggest improvements to the practicum agency's systems, processes or policies (AASW, 2003). A practicum within one's own culture in itself can be challenging especially for people who have strived to establish a non-judgemental approach. It is one thing to identify areas for improvement in one's own workplace as a paid employee, however to present oneself as a student who suggests she knows a better way of approaching a profession that the recipients of her ideas have been doing for many more years than her, requires a different sensitivity. Taking the next step to not only be in a workplace that is not one's own, but an entirely different culture, creates a new challenge that is intimidating and exciting for every moment of the practicum. As a result the intersection of cultural sensitivity and robust research design and critical organisational analysis, create the basis for a practicum approach that yields meaningful learning outcomes for the student, practicum agency and university liaison alike.

Universal Application of Social Work Principles and Values

As discussed above, a component of completing the requirements of the practicum, the researcher was required to satisfy learning goals drawn from the AASW practice standards (AASW, 2003) and the

one of their two field practice placements overseas (AASW, 2012). This provision suggests that the learning goals, and therefore the documents they are drawn from are universal in their application to social work practice. Whilst this deduction cannot be assumed necessarily, it does raise an interesting challenge for social work students to navigate.

An example that demonstrates this concept of universality of ethics or values was in the researcher's exploration of an ethical dilemma involving the notion of confidentiality. A specific situation that arose that would ordinarily be an optimal opportunity for considering the ethical implications of disclosure to a third party raised a second layer of ethical questions for consideration. The higher level ethical issue that had to be solved before addressing the presenting ethical dilemma was the consideration of whether the student could apply the AASW Code of Ethics to a non-Australian cultural environment. Australia, with its western values of individualism and self-sufficiency, represents an entirely different cultural context to the Indian culture that places a greater importance on collective responsibilities, and interpretations of power, status and ownership distinct from the researcher's. So to expect that a conversation in supervision could begin with the discussion in relation to disclosure misses an enormous collection of issues in relation to universal application of values, imposition of power, assumptions of superiority of social work practice, among others.

As an international social work placement, this opportunity has provided the researcher with the ideal environment to explore the application of grounded theory and strive for cultural competence. A willingness to be open and genuinely curious about the role of a school social worker in that environment was the researcher's primary focus. Her postmodern preferences and previous narrative therapy practice experience provided an ideal foundation for that perspective. The researcher strived throughout her placement to maintain an awareness of her perceptions, judgements and assessments with a view to reflecting on them and considering the impact of her own culture and

to meet the AASW practice standards, with her own imposed obligation to recognise that many of those practice standards are not necessarily relevant or valuable within the context of the placement. Throughout the placement the researcher attempted to align her learnings with the AASW practice standards and gain new insight as a social work practitioner through that process. At the same time she was focused on gaining an understanding of the priorities of social work in the Indian context, and how to represent her sensitively within that context.

Conclusion

Taking the time to explore and reflect on the experience of being a student placed in an international social work practicum solidifies the experience and makes clear the rich learning opportunity that it was. This is true not only for the educational and professional benefits gained but also the personal development that resulted. All of the conditions within which this practicum occurred may not be, or need to be, recreated to generate a similarly rich experience. However hopefully, what has been shared herein will provide some useful considerations to explore for all parties directly or indirectly involved in such an arrangement.

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