

A FIELD TRIP AS PART OF THE SOCIAL WORK RESEARCH MODULE

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This study focused on the value of a field excursion for final-year Social Work students as part of the research module with the aim of integrating the theory and practice of research. Students were expected to do unstructured interviewing with older persons in a deep rural community, with the main focus of the study being on the impressions and experiences of the students. Seven main themes were delineated in this study according to narratives given by participants, namely Social Work and research, feelings of the researcher, knowledge of the self, resilience, infrastructure, challenges facing the community and future perspectives.

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INTRODUCTION

This study was undertaken to determine the value of a field exercise for students as part of the research module in Social Work, presented at the North-West University during the final year of study; it constitutes the entire fourth year, together with a practice placement of three months and eight other modules. The field trip to a deep rural area took place during March, after the 32 students in the group had had some basic training in research methodology. This article will discuss the problem statement and the aim of the study, after which the research methodology and a detailed discussion of the findings will be presented. The views of the students on their expectations of the field trip as well as what it meant to them will be discussed in terms of themes and sub-themes.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Students often approach courses in the practice of social work with enthusiasm, but regard the course in research with apprehension (Royse, 2011:5). The publications by Strydom (1998, 1999) on the training and knowledge of social workers indicate that social workers see themselves as pragmatic, while during research they are expected to keep practice at a distance; they also felt that theory and practice cannot be easily integrated. Many social work students find it difficult to master research methodology and this is often due to an attitude problem. There is a general stereotyped view that the qualities that make a good researcher are often seen as handicaps for a good practitioner – researchers are supposed to be rational and insensitive to human feelings and are supposed to lack intuition and sensitivity towards clients (Royse, 2011:5-6). If one looks at the practitioner-researcher paradigm (Corby, 2006:167-169; De Vos *et al.*, 1998:13-14), it is clear that this is not true, since any social worker should also be a good researcher and research should be part of any action in practice.

As part of the total spectrum of the social work practicum placements over the four years of training, a field trip grounded in research can enhance the knowledge, professional competence and integration of all the methods of Social Work (Farley *et al.*, 2003:133). If a field trip can be organised for students to experience some parts of the research methodology in practice, this can enhance the learning experience and increase interest in research. It is of course not possible to give students experience of the total spectrum of research methodologies; therefore it was decided to let a dyad of two students do in-depth interviewing with six aged persons living in the community of Valspan, Jankempdorp on the border of the North West province, the Free State province and the Northern Cape province. This community is approximately 280 km from Potchefstroom.

The research question for this study can be formulated as follows: In what ways can the experience of a research-based field trip benefit final-year Social Work students?

AIM

The aim of this study was to assist students to experience the empirical side of research in order for them to be able to integrate the theory and practice of social work research, and to gain their opinions on what the field trip meant to them as final-year Social Work students.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Although elderly persons were interviewed, the focus of this study was on the students and their research experience. The students were required to interview older persons in groups of two in a particular community and to write up their field notes and eventually the reports. Students were asked to report especially on their own impressions and feelings while doing the interviews.

The total number of 32 students had to interview the older persons in the community by way of unstructured or in-depth interviewing by asking only one question and then listening and probing (Alston & Bowles, 2003:117-119; Botma *et al.*, 2010:207-208; Mitchell & Jolley, 2010:278) within the qualitative paradigm (Gray, 2014:168). The group of students consisted of equal numbers of black and white students. Hence it was easy to divide them into groups of two: one black and one white student. The two students in each group would then act as main interviewer and co-interviewer, and then change roles so that each student had the opportunity to act as interviewer on three and co-interviewer on another three occasions. Six interviews by each group of two students were thus expected. In total a number of 96 interviews took place. Although Bryman (2008:197) argues that the presence of two interviewers is unlikely to provide added value, for training purposes this can be valuable – students learn from the example of others and value can be added to the interviewing process as well.

These roles and skills (Carey, 2012:109-125; Gray, 2014:390-401) were properly spelled out in class before the field trip. It was also explained to students that the field trip could only cover a small part of the research methodology and seeing that the focus in this instance was on qualitative interviewing (Flick, 2009:150-172) it does not mean that this was the only paradigm in which they could work or that the one is more important than the other.

Students role-played their particular positions and worked together on ethical clearance for the project (Corey *et al.*, 2011) and together set up the schedule used for the qualitative interviews. They were also well prepared for the multicultural, deep rural experience, the needs of the aged in the particular area, what to expect in the dwellings of the older persons and the role that poverty, crime and HIV/Aids is playing in the lives of older people (Roux & Strydom, 2011:323-337; Strydom & Strydom, 2007:61-78).

Students were well briefed on what they had to take along for this outing. Besides some basic food, sleeping bags, a change or two of clothes, they were also asked to comment on what they were about to see and experience. Students were well prepared on what to expect from the living arrangements in an old clubhouse of a mine and that they had to share accommodation, bathrooms and the kitchen for the duration of the week they were

about to spend in the specific area. They had the choice of opting out if they so wished. However, nobody did and were all looking forward to this experience. Two lecturers accompanied the students and the group travelled to the community in three minibuses.

No sampling was done and the various groups of students each had to take a different street in the community and interview the participants that met the specific inclusion criteria, being older persons as part of a multigenerational household, living on an old age pension, and who are able to converse with the students with no obvious signs of progressive dementia that would impair their functioning and participation during the interview (Keigher *et al.*, 2000:168; Lymbery, 2005:28-29; Timonen, 2008:30-32).

Data analysis took place by way of Tesch's approach (1990), namely into themes and sub-themes. Trustworthiness of data was ensured according the five aspects, namely truth value, applicability, consistency, neutrality and authenticity (Botma *et al.*, 2010:232-235). This project was part of an overall research project of AUTHeR (African Unit for Trans-Disciplinary Health Research) and this research unit assisted with the logistics of the trip, such as accommodation and transport. Written informed consent in a context of voluntary participation was gained from all parties, meaning students and older persons, and measures were taken to ensure respect, privacy, anonymity and confidentiality (Corey *et al.*, 2011; D'Cruz & Jones, 2010; Strydom, 2011:115-126). Students were made aware of the importance of treating all information they gained as confidential, whether it is information from the older persons or from other students, and especially from the co-researcher. All completed schedules and other data will be kept locked up for a five-year period.

FINDINGS

The findings are discussed in terms of seven main themes and several sub-themes in every category, as set out below. These findings refer to the students' experiences of the field trip and what they learned from this exercise.

Social work and research

The first theme concerns research in social work and six sub-themes can be distinguished, namely the shortage of social workers, the integration of theory and practice, the research module itself, research as a secondary method, research on the scientific and practice levels.

- Shortage of social workers

The comments below highlight some of the most outstanding issues regarding the shortage of social workers:

"I experienced the shortage of social workers first hand while doing this research."

"Only one social worker in Jankempdorp for all these people can be considered ridiculous."

"I realised what is expected of social workers in our country."

“It came to my mind that the issues in this community is overwhelming and is a hopeless situation that cannot be remedied with very few professionals available in the community. Immediately I realised that prospective social workers should never lose hope and stay positive in negative circumstances and do what they can.”

These statements show that the shortage of social workers plays a major role in the non-delivery of services in South Africa. The factors contributing to this state of affairs include the fact that 45% of all registered social workers are either employed in the private sector or do not practise as social workers (Anon., 2012a; Anon, 2012b). Almost 1 000 qualified social workers who had received bursaries from the Department of Social Development have not yet been placed in positions as a result of insufficient budgeting or administrative problems (Waters, 2012a); very heavy caseloads and general pressure of work also compromise quality of work (Waters, 2012b). For these and many other reasons, social work as a profession is indeed in trouble and the ratio of social workers to the population is even worse in the rural and deep rural areas (Anon., 2012a).

- Integration of theory and practice

Some of the most important issues mentioned in this regard were:

“I am looking forward to becoming a competent researcher – on the practical as well as theoretical levels.”

“I want to write a research report that can contribute to society and the field of social work.”

“The field trip assisted me to narrow the gap between theory and practice.”

“This was the first time that I could experience research in the field.”

“After the field trip I realised how research works in practice.”

“I think that research can change people’s lives, especially those whose voices are never heard.”

“I am scared of doing research but am more than willing to learn to become a competent social worker.”

From these statements one can deduce that some students were looking forward to the research experience, wanted to make it a successful endeavour, and hoped that the practical experience would assist them in linking theory with practice in their daily endeavours (Strydom, 1998:66). The integration of research and practice is also reflected in the rapidly growing movement towards evidence-based practice and to change the focus from acquiring knowledge to the application of knowledge (Barker, 2014:148; Coggins & Hatchett, 2002:1; Compton *et al.*, 2005:59). The research module is considered difficult, scary and intimidating by many and some do not see the link between theory and practice and the integration of research with the primary methods of social work (Fook, s.a.:1; Strydom, 1998:65-66). Carelse and Dykes (s.a.:2) and Grinnell (2001:538) also support the notion of integration of theory and practice by way of linking evaluation with daily activities in practice and bridging the gap between the

lecture room and the field of practice. Grinnell and Unrau (2014:24-26) put it in stronger words and state that social work research and practice have much in common and that both are more or less parallel problem-solving processes based on careful observation, analysis and a structured *modus operandi*.

- The research module itself

This section presents the comments relating to the module itself:

“The module seems to be overwhelming but I realise that one will have to start somewhere and put all the information together in order to form a logical sequence.”

“I do not think that I am ever going to become a researcher and so far the module makes me feel uncertain.”

“Numbers and figures scare me, but hopefully my attitude will change.”

“It feels like a module which entails a lot of hard work and does not thrill me much.”

“So far my knowledge of research is still very restricted, but hopefully after I have completed this year it will be a different story.”

“I could apply some of my skills that I have mastered in the previous years into this module.”

“I am inquisitive to learn more about research and believe that I can benefit from it.”

“I am interested in research and would like to specialise in research many years from now.”

“I am enthusiastic about this module and eager to reach the outcomes.”

“I am excited to do my own research project and to do a research proposal and to write it up in a manuscript.”

“It seems such a long way from the initial stages through to the final research report.”

Some negative and some positive emotions regarding research came to the fore. Some of the students felt that they would never be great researchers, that it entails a lot of hard work, and that the module makes them feel uncertain and overwhelmed. On the other hand, some participants felt that the module makes them inquisitive (Anon. s.a.:1; Grinnell & Unrau, 2014:13), and excites and fills them with enthusiasm for the research course. Strydom (1998:66), in his study on practising social workers, also found that participants regarded research as encouraging and a necessary part of daily functioning.

- Research as a secondary method

Some of the viewpoints of participants on research as a secondary method are:

“Research can play a role in satisfying the needs of people by way of the primary methods.”

“Research should be done in order to determine the plan of action of the social worker with his/her clients.”

“I want to make a difference in people’s lives and be an effective researcher with the research knowledge that I have gained.”

“During the field trip it was difficult to distinguish between direct services and research because some people wanted direct help and did not understand that we are only doing research and not direct social work as such.”

“I do not understand the importance of research but are willing to learn – hopefully research will assist me to be a better social worker.”

From these comments it is evident that the students realised that research is important for better scientific practice. Research is generally regarded as a secondary and enabling method in social work so that individuals, families, groups and communities can function optimally (Compton *et al.*, 2005:8; Skidmore *et al.*, 1994:117-118). Strydom’s study (1999:109) found that 77% of respondents indicated research as a secondary method of social work. In another study 75% of respondents indicated that research is dominated by the primary methods (Strydom, 1997:125).

- On a scientific level

In this regard the following were mentioned:

“I realised that there are many variables that can influence your findings.”

“Initially I found it hard to be objective, but mastered the skill during the field work.”

“I realised that an experimental design is more for senior researchers who can execute it in a scientifically correct fashion by way of controlling all possible extraneous variables. I will rather attempt to do single systems or participant observation.”

“I realise the importance of evidence-based strategies to enhance my client’s social functioning.”

From these comments it can be seen that participants made a number of discoveries during the research module and especially during the field visit. They realised that there are always a variety of extraneous variables (Gravetter & Forzano, 2012:259-262) that play a role in any research project and that objectivity is the basis of all research endeavours (Mitchell & Jolley, 2010:210-211). Some participants could assess the value of, and preference for, particular research methods, such as experimental research, single systems and participant observation (Rubin & Babbie, 2011:253-261; Strydom, 2011b:159-170; Strydom, 2011c:328-340).

- On a practice level

The most outstanding issues were:

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“I learned to be quiet and to really listen to what the people have to say.”

“I found the direct contact with the elderly rewarding and learned more from them as a group.”

“I really learned what it means to talk about human functioning in society – this is the task of the social worker.”

“I realised that although these participants all lived in the same community they were vastly different and experience their circumstances differently.”

“I realised the difficulty in doing multicultural interviewing – the questions were answered politely but in a distant fashion.”

“I learned not to generalise and stereotype people.”

“I learned to get the real facts behind the obvious and to interpret them.”

“I realised to brain storm with myself and write down these initial ideas in order to get started.”

“I learnt a lot from my co-worker (a fellow student) and her different approach to each interview – it was not always easy working with a colleague who differs a lot from me – we had a few professional misunderstandings but this was good for both of us.”

From these statements by students one can see that they gained a variety of practical skills or that some of the old skills were realised in another context. In this regard multicultural interviewing skills, listening skills, objectivity, commitment, open-mindedness, human functioning, brainstorming a certain idea and differing from a colleague in a professional manner were experienced in a practical way (Carey, 2012:12-13; Corey *et al.*, 2011:145-147; Denscombe, 2008:157-160).

Feelings of the students

The second theme focused on two sub-themes, namely thankfulness and sadness.

- **Thankfulness**

Regarding thankfulness the following sentiments were reported:

“Seeing the circumstances of other people filled me with thankfulness.”

“The field trip opened my eyes for other people’s circumstances.”

“The field trip made me realise how fortunate I am in life.”

“We as students say that we are poor but after seeing the circumstances in Jankempdorj we do not know what poverty is.”

These comments point towards feelings of thankfulness and gratitude about their own circumstances compared to people living in these poverty-stricken communities. These feelings can also lead to an urgent need to assist others in difficult situations and can be considered as one motive for taking social work as a career.

- Sadness

With the focus on sadness the following comments were made:

“I felt a pain in my heart to see how these people live.”

“It was quite a saddening experience seeing things that I could never believe to be possible.”

“I experienced especially sadness at the hopelessness in this community.”

“I learned a lot about people living in these terrible circumstances and was wondering if I would make it if I had to live in overcrowded conditions with the strong smell of blocked drains.”

“I experienced how it would be to live in their shoes.”

From these comments it becomes obvious that the field trip enhanced students' experience of people's circumstances in deep rural areas they obviously have little experience of. Feelings of sadness were expressed in various ways such as not really believing what they saw and registering the hopelessness and negative circumstances in these communities. Perhaps for the first time the students realised what real poverty means and were enlightened on how people live and survive in these circumstances.

Knowledge of the self

Regarding knowledge of the self the following points were made:

“I learned a lot about myself and other people.”

“The practical experience led to introspection into my own circumstances.”

“Initially it was a scary experience, but soon I realised how to cope in these circumstances.”

“It was an eye-opening experience to see how other people live.”

“The tour was wonderful and I would like to do another tour of another area in order to compare the two communities' circumstances.”

“This project assisted me to apply what we have studied in class about research methodology.”

“This outing into the field of social work research made me curious to know more about the social world people find themselves in.”

“I realised that research needs to be done systematically.”

“I need more self-confidence to become at ease with research.”

“I soon felt part of the community and could identify with the inhabitants.”

“This group project was interesting, but I would like to embark on an individual project.”

From these comments it becomes clear that students learned much about themselves, who they truly are, their perceptions of the world around them and their own position on

research in social work. Ideas that came to the fore are that research has to be done systematically (Christie & Alkin, 2013:11), that a researcher must have an inquiring mind (Tabinas & Apita, 2010), that self-confidence is needed to do research, and that they learned much about social functioning (Barker, 2014:397).

Resilience

The following comments were reported on the resilience of the older persons who took part in the study:

“I do not understand what it means to still be fairly happy while there are a lack of basic services such as social services, medical services and tertiary education.”

“I realised that people do not need many earthly possessions to be happy in life.”

“What struck me was the multilingualism of the community and how Tswana, Zulu and coloured people existed alongside each other and talked each other’s dialects.”

“Despite poverty, joblessness and a shortage of resources the people seemed to be content and happy.”

“How can people be so happy in such negative circumstances?”

“I have seen so many positive things in this community – people relying on each other and assisting each other.”

“I have never seen so many resilient people who could cope with negative circumstances in such a wonderful manner.”

Resilience can be defined as a dynamic process of understanding positive adaptation, functioning well or having good outcomes in the face of significant adversity, cumulative risk, crises, stressors, threats or trauma in order to gain competence in achieving the appropriate developmental tasks of the different life stages and to cope in an emotionally and physically healthy way (Barker, 2014:365; Masten, 2001:228; Masten, 2007:923; Schoon & Bynner, 2003:22). Ungar (2011:11) argues that the process of resilience also has to do with the quality of support one receives. The issue of significant adversity in this community, such as poverty, joblessness and lack of resources, was mentioned by participants in this study.

Infrastructure

The following aspects were mentioned regarding infrastructure:

“Very few job opportunities are available in this community, yet the people stay.”

“Lack of education and resources were noticeable.”

“The area is totally underdeveloped and the infrastructure is not up to standard.”

“The roads are in a very bad condition with deep holes and when it rains it become like dams. The wind blows up dust in the dry season.”

“The area is totally unhealthy and leads to diseases such as tuberculosis and other lung diseases.”

“The one clinic in the area is insufficiently equipped and only open during normal office hours.”

“This is really a deep rural area in need of services.”

“The lack of basic services such as running water, electricity and sanitation came to my attention.”

“My first impression of the total area was one of being old, dilapidated and underdeveloped.”

“There are no job opportunities such as factories, mines and general industries.”

“I got the smell of old mud from the holes in the dirt roads hanging in the air which was quite daunting.”

“I can only hope that development will come to this area to uplift the people of the area.”

Regarding the infrastructure of the community, the students mentioned various issues such as poverty, lack of job opportunities, education and resources (Alcock, 1997; Bezuidenhout, 2002). The fact that the area is underdeveloped, the inadequate state of the roads, the only clinic in the area not being up to standard and the generally unhealthy circumstances in the community were also mentioned as negative factors regarding the infrastructure of the area. The lack of basic services such as running water, electricity and proper sanitation was also mentioned. Participants' overall view of the community was one of despair, underdevelopment and the urgent need for reconstruction.

Challenges in the community

The following challenges in the community were mentioned:

“The presence of many babies, pregnant women and people infected with HIV are evident in this community – it seems as if the people could not care less.”

“Girls become pregnant in order to get the child grant to have an income of some sort.”

“I have seen 15 people living in a small house consisting of only two rooms – this cannot be healthy to anyone.”

“Teenage pregnancy and poverty are the largest social problems in this area.”

“I noticed many children on the streets being up to mischief – they should attend school but could not care less or do not have the means to buy school clothes and other necessities.”

“Illiteracy is very high in the community and nothing is being done to have classes and skills training for adults.”

Aspects mentioned were teenage pregnancy, HIV and Aids, overcrowded living conditions, poverty and children who are not attending school. Participants regarded these issues as the most serious to be addressed by the various role-players (Adams *et al.*, 2009; Nicholas *et al.*, 2010; Osei-Hwedie & Jacques, 2007).

Future perspective

The following are some of the most outstanding aspects mentioned regarding the future perspective of the community members as reflected by participants:

“People live off their pension money and are not interested in doing anything to better their own circumstances.”

“I realised that their world view are very limited and some have not been out of the immediate area in which they live.”

“I realised little interest in the outside world and a focus on the everyday situation.”

“I think that these people have lost all hope of being able to better their circumstances – they accept the situation and carry on with the job of daily living and coping with negative circumstances.”

Participants noticed a general sense of immediate needs satisfaction in this community instead of putting anything off for something better in time. They live for today and do not think about the future and everything revolves around the monthly pension income. The world outside of the community does not really exist and they also do not care much about the wider world. Participants noticed a general feeling of being blunted, indifferent and apathetic in this community (Barker, 2014:25,45). These feelings refer to a blunting or dulling of expression of real emotions and a lack of interest in anything new.

DISCUSSION

Regarding social work and research, participants mentioned the shortage of social workers and that this is one of the reasons for the non-delivery of services in South Africa and especially in the deep rural areas. The field experience assisted students in integrating theory with practice and in registering that the two processes have much in common as both are problem-solving processes based on observation, analysis and structure. Some negative and some positive emotions came to the fore regarding the research module itself such as, on the negative side, that research entails a huge amount of hard work and makes them feel discouraged, while on the positive side, research made them feel excited and enthusiastic. Regarding research as a secondary method, participants mentioned that research is important as an enabling social work method for bettering their services to individuals, groups and communities. On a scientific level participants made observations about being part of a research project, what extraneous variables actually mean, and how to be objective in everything one does. Regarding

research on a practical level, the students mentioned that they learned a lot from their co-workers, they developed skills in multicultural interviewing, felt growing commitment, and learned how to differ from a colleague in a professional manner.

Thankfulness and sadness can be regarded as the overarching feelings of the students who participated in this study. Regarding thankfulness, students mentioned their own positive circumstances when compared with this poverty-stricken community. Feelings of sadness transpired from the hopelessness of these negative circumstances in which these people live and what could be done to minimise this situation. Students learned much about themselves and their perceptions of the world around them and linked this to their own position towards research. The fact of doing research in a systematic manner, of developing an inquiring mind and increasing knowledge of the self were appreciated by many of the students.

Resilience was seen by participants as a more or less dynamic process of adaptation and proper functioning when facing adversity or trauma – the quality of support received also plays a role in this total process. Regarding the infrastructure of the community, participants sensed the general underdevelopment in the community such as the state of the roads, the clinic, overall unhealthy circumstances and a lack of basic services. HIV and Aids, poverty, overcrowded living conditions and teenage pregnancies were mentioned as some of the challenges faced by all the role-players in the community. A general sense of immediate needs satisfaction by community members was noticed by participants and of living for today and not really thinking about the future and the world beyond the community. Feelings of bluntness, dulling of expression and a lack of interest in anything new were also noticed by participants.

Some general observations were made by participants, such as how good this multicultural research experience was, bonding with class mates, and understanding the relationship between the theory and practice of research. On a more negative note, participants mentioned that the general experience of the field trip and the scope of social work overwhelmed them to a certain extent. They also realised that a social worker cannot be everything to everyone, but that one has to do what one can to the best of one's ability. Besides some negative aspects mentioned by participants, the overall experience was excellent and assisted students to partly realise the negative aspects of the profession before graduating – in other words, to gain a balanced viewpoint that might lead to a well-rounded practitioner who can face the challenges of the profession without becoming overwhelmed.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It can be recommended that a tour of this nature regarding field research be planned and executed for final-year Social Work students. Such a field trip will definitely integrate the theory and practice of the research module. It can also be said that such a field trip should last for at least a week in order for students to get to know a particular community to a certain extent and to identify and become part of the set-up for a while. The budget is mostly limited and costs can be kept to a minimum if the research field is located within a radius of 50-100 km from the particular university. Travelling and

accommodation are the highest cost factors, and if they can be reduced the budget will be more manageable. The cost aspect of such a field trip will always be a constraining factor in such an endeavour, but with proper planning and sponsorships it will become a viable proposition. The arrangements for such a field trip entail much planning and is time consuming, but most decidedly worthwhile.

SUMMARY

The aim of this study was achieved in the sense that it affording students an opportunity to experience research in practice. Students could afterwards express their feelings about and experiences of this field trip. They were able to see the link between the theory and practice of research, and also that research is part and parcel of what a social worker is supposed to do. A problem statement for the article was stated, and an aim and appropriate research methodology were described. The findings were discussed in seven main themes and several sub-themes. Following the discussion, a couple of recommendations were made.

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