



Social work student research

2012-2013

An update on research projects conducted by student social workers at the University of Stirling

This booklet outlines a selection of the research projects conducted by students on qualifying Social Work programmes at the University of Stirling. The projects were conducted in the 2012-2013 academic year by students in their final year of study. They were designed and carried out by each student under the guidance of university staff, and with the generous co-operation of a range of statutory and voluntary agencies. The outlines presented here were made available by the students specifically for wider dissemination of their work.

The qualifying Social Work programmes at Stirling have a strong tradition of teaching about social work research,

broader discussions about evidence-informed practice and the different types of knowledge drawn upon in practice. As part of this module, students gain an insight into research going on around them in the Social Work subject group at Stirling and in the wider School of Applied Social Science. Details about our wider research activities are here: <http://www.stir.ac.uk/social-science/research/>

In addition to their learning about research methods, candidates for the BA (Hons) in Social Work and MSc in Social Work Studies are required to produce a dissertation that reports on their own piece of empirical research. The outlines on the following pages summarise a selection of successful dissertations.



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and about the relevance of research to practice. All students study a module that examines the generation of research knowledge, in the context of

The Social Work subject group is happy to be contacted for more information about student research. For instance, we are always looking for suggestions from agencies, about useful areas of research that might be suitable for a student project. Such suggestions can help students to select a topic of direct benefit to practice and/or policy.

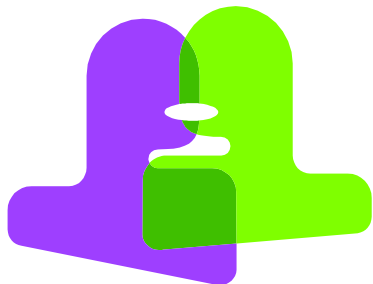
Please contact the co-ordinator of the research methods and dissertation module for more information: contact details are supplied on p.8.

Dissertations that have been awarded a pass mark are held in the university library and are available for consultation.

Emotional intelligence in youth work relationships

Iona McLean

Recent research and government policy suggests a renewed focus on the centrality of the working relationship within social work practice. In the *21st Century Social Work Review: Changing Lives* (Scottish Executive, 2006), McNeill et al (2005) and Kerr et al (2005) concluded that 'the quality of the therapeutic relationship between social worker and individual or family is critical to achieving successful outcomes ... [and is] equally applicable to all areas of social work practice.' Equally, it is argued that emotional intelligence is very much interconnected with the development of the social



work/service user relationship (Ingram, 2012; Morrison, 2007) and relates closely to the core conditions of positive relationship building which include genuineness, warmth, acceptance, encouragement and approval and empathy (Lishman, 1994).

The purpose of this small-scale qualitative study was to explore the relevance of emotional intelligence within the young person – worker relationship in a young person-led group context. The data was collected from qualitative interviews with both young people and their youth workers which focussed on gathering the participants' views and experiences of the working relationship.

There were four main themes that transpired from analysis of the data. Reflective practice was considered in terms of the workers' ability to reflect on their own value base and personal experiences

and findings suggest that reflection is essential for the development of emotional intelligence and in turn, developing and maintaining positive working relationships. Consistent with existing research, the core conditions of positive relationship building were evident within the findings and suggested that emotional intelligence was linked closely to the humanising effect commonly present within small communities (Cheers, 1998; Green, 2003). Leading on from this, an exploration of personal and professional boundaries found that workers' use of humour can impact both positively and negatively on the working relationship. Ultimately, all of the above were combined as necessary components for supporting the young people to realise their full potential, concluding that in part, this was to support young people to become emotionally intelligent.

Dual diagnosis: services in the voluntary sector

Lori Bell

My dissertation was on dual diagnosis - the co-existence of substance misuse and mental health issues - from a social work perspective. The aim of the study was to find out more about the services available to adults with a dual diagnosis within the voluntary sector in central Scotland. The study sought the views and experiences of mental health and drug treatment practitioners, in order to build an understanding of professional roles

and responsibilities in the field of dual diagnosis, of the knowledge base workers draw on and of the challenges they face. Participants provided insight into and knowledge of dual diagnosis, highlighting effective approaches used in practice, the challenges faced and suggestions for overall service improvement.

“THE AIM OF THE STUDY WAS TO FIND OUT MORE ABOUT THE SERVICES AVAILABLE TO ADULTS WITH A DUAL DIAGNOSIS”

Social work in island communities

Anne Martin

In Scotland there is limited research into how social workers practise in rural areas despite recognition that they face different challenges from their urban counterparts. Social workers practising on the Scottish islands have no option but to practice within the community in which they live. This research was conducted to answer some of the questions about how island social workers manage the challenges presented by living and working in the same community. Seven social workers were interviewed in a qualitative study designed to explore the challenges they face and the strategies they utilise. Issues relating to confidentiality, visibility, safety and dual relationships emerged although the benefits of practising in such a setting tended to outweigh the difficulties. Participants utilised a number of strategies that took into account relationships with service users, the use of supervision and negotiating difficulties alongside colleagues. There was an awareness of cultural differences and that attention should be paid to these. Participants also felt there was a need for support that recognised the potential difficulties they might face in living and working in the same community.

1.1 Summary of Overall Findings

Despite the limited scope of the research, it has highlighted that rural practice presents a number of challenges in terms of managing professional boundaries. Participants dealt with these issues regularly and employed a range of strategies for resolving them, depending on the type

and nature of the issue at hand. For example, strategies involved participants adopting avoidance techniques or self-imposed restrictions on their personal lives. For others, the lifestyles they led negated the need to do this. Clear boundaries were set by the participants to separate their professional and personal lives, and ensure they had the time they needed to “switch off”. Boundaries were also set in order to manage the complex issues of confidentiality and visibility for both social workers and service users in the community. Participants recognised the importance of the working relation-



ship, and how this is sustained in smaller communities where meeting service users is a frequent occurrence. Consideration was given to this prior to participants seeking an appropriate strategy for a particular situation.

Strategies were also developed in conjunction with the expectations participants felt the traditions and culture of the island placed upon them; participants felt that behaviours observed in the community which were deemed to be unacceptable would reflect poorly on the individual and the service they represent. A clear example provided was where participants felt that, if they were seen in places like pubs by service users, the working relationship would be affected. As a result,

participants placed clear expectations on their own behaviour in their personal and professional lives.

Among the participants, whilst there was agreement that education had not addressed rural practice directly, it was unclear if education should address this. In terms of support, participants generally agreed that the support they received needed to recognise the challenges of their setting. The research also indicated that colleagues were of particular importance in negotiating the challenges of rural practice. This latter point is consistent with the literature that argues support and supervision should address the realities of rural practice. However, the findings were not entirely consistent with those who argue education should equip practitioners for the specifics of practising in a rural setting.

1.2 Possibilities for Future Research

Taking the above into consideration, there are a number of possibilities for future research. In terms of expectations of behaviour, it would be useful to gain an understanding of what service users and the wider rural community actually expect of their social workers, and the implications of this for both the individual and the service they represent. It would also be interesting to gain an understanding of some of the issues discussed from the perspective of service users, for example confidentiality or dual relationships. Research into these issues from a different perspective might be an important way to help practition-

ers develop effective strategies for living and working in the same community. Education, training and support were issues highlighted by the literature and rural practice was not directly addressed in the education of the participants. However, further research would be required to understand if rural practice should be addressed in education and the most significant aspects to cover.

1.3 Implications for Practice

A number of issues emerged that appear to have implications for practice in a rural setting. First, the research showed that having “professional distance”, or a strict separation between personal and professional life, does not exist in the way it might be possible in an urban setting. Highly visible professionals such as social workers are affected by the decisions they make when they meet those affected out in the community. Decisions are more open to the scrutiny of the community and may therefore be subject to views that cannot be challenged because of confidentiality (Turbett, 2009). To support practitioners, it might be beneficial to consider how to develop community understanding about how and why social workers make decisions without breaching confidentiality.

Second, professional guidelines and codes of conduct are not always helpful in negotiating the challenges of practice. For example, boundaries in island settings cannot be strictly maintained and the research raises questions as to whether this should be the case. In terms of dual relationships in particular, the notion that a service user is a service user for life, and that social workers should never enter into another type of relationship seems difficult to justify. Is it

fair to users of social services, who are no longer in receipt of such services, to be thought of forever as a “former” service user? There is not sufficient scope here to consider how working relationships can ever really end in rural communities if services users must always be considered as such by their former social workers to avoid the potential pitfalls of dual relationships. I do not dispute the potentially exploitative nature of dual relationships and the need to assess one’s role, however, for social workers in rural areas it is both stressful (Halverson and Brownlee, 2010) and impractical (Pugh, 2007b) to isolate oneself to avoid entering into one.

One of the key themes that emerged from the research that might provide an opportunity for wider learning was that of working relationships, how they are built, and sustained. Participants set boundaries around their professional and personal lives but anticipated they would meet service users outside of their work setting. The strategies used often considered the effect on the working relationship, and the impression gained was that these relationships were generally positive. The research suggests that because strict professional distance is impossible to maintain, the working relationships in rural areas have different characteristics than those in urban areas. These relationships featured informality in unanticipated meetings where people “*pass the time of day*”, and acceptance by the worker that they shared the same spaces as service users. It would also suggest social workers do not need professional distance to ensure the development and management of professional boundaries and this might apply to other settings.

Furthermore, interdisciplinary practice appeared to be featured by positive working relationships. These relationships included characteristics of accessibility, approachability and informality, especially in hierarchical structures within agencies and departments. This does not deny the possibility of conflict and differing perspectives between professionals, or that the development of these relationships might be related to the smaller nature of the community. Networking appeared to be more straightforward because workers could contact named individuals, and had often met them in person, which would seem to account for some of the personal aspects of working relationships. The research suggests there are opportunities for wider learning in terms of how relational characteristics, such as accessibility and approachability, can be integrated into working relationships.

“THE RESEARCH SUGGESTS THAT... WORKING RELATIONSHIPS IN RURAL AREAS HAVE DIFFERENT CHARACTERISTICS THAN THOSE IN URBAN AREAS”

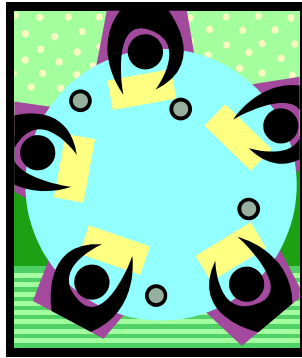
Overall, and despite the challenges discussed, participants felt there were many positive aspects to practising in an island setting and that these outweighed any drawbacks. From the research a key message would be that practising on an island setting can be beneficial in a number of ways. However, individual practitioners must take into consideration how they would deal effectively with the challenges that are so clearly presented, in a way that takes into account service users, colleagues, and the wider community.

Domestic abuse and multi-agency working

Dianne Porter

The National Domestic Abuse Delivery Plan (SG, 2008) details the importance of agencies taking a multi-agency approach and working collaboratively when addressing the issue of domestic abuse within families. This will ensure women and children are better protected and men are held accountable for their behaviour. It also notes that an increase in resources available for working with men, women and children is needed in this field of work in the absence of a criminal court order. This research paper examines the lessons learned by one local authority where, despite resources being available in the form of a non-court mandated perpetrator programme and associated services for women and children, there are still challenges and

barriers to overcome when taking a multi-agency approach in this area of work, particularly when bringing together Children Services and Adult Services.



This small scale study took a qualitative approach using semi-structured interviews, interviewing five experienced children and families social workers. There were different perspectives on the benefits and chal-

lenges of a multi-agency approach and it was evident that approaches to working with men and women when domestic abuse has been identified have shifted for children and families social workers. In part this has been influenced by a multi-agency approach to their work, having resources available in the area and working closely with a specialist team. However bringing adult and children services closer together has not been without challenges and whilst both teams have a shared understanding of domestic abuse and its impact on women and children, and a commitment to improve services to protect women and children, there still continues to be barriers to effective practice.

Effective support for adults living with HIV

Rose Cwiernia

Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) is an illness which affects approximately thirty-three million people worldwide. The illness attacks the immune system and can lead to life-threatening opportunistic infections. In Scotland there are more people than ever living with HIV due to earlier testing, effective treatments and specialist support services. Social work/care involvement with those living with HIV has changed over the years, however the complex and emotive nature of this support has remained. As the current economic climate continues to increase the pressures placed on available resources such valuable

support may be compromised.



Research aims, methods and main findings.

Aims:

This study aimed to understand practitioners' views of effective practice when working with adults living with HIV. The study focused on four research questions:

- What is effective practice when working with adults living with HIV?
- What skills, values and

knowledge are required to provide this effective practice?

- What policy, legislation and research have influenced effective practice? Has this been a positive or negative influence?
- What are the barriers to providing effective practice? How do practitioners practise in these situations?

Researching the views of current practitioners aimed to highlight good practice and the barriers to be overcome in order to continue providing effective support.



Methods:

A qualitative method was used in this study as it aimed to gain an understanding of the practitioners' views and experiences. Semi-structured interviews were completed with seven social care practitioners employed within a large city. One of these practitioners is a social worker within a local authority team specifically for individuals living with a blood borne virus. The other six are employed by a large voluntary agency which provides support for individuals living with HIV.



Main Findings:

One of the main findings from this research was the need for **long term support** for adults living with HIV.

- This requirement was unanimously associated with the adults having a number of varying needs and the requirement for effective support to be holistic.

To provide such support practitioners unanimously agreed that **a trustful working relationship** was required.

- Effective working relationships were associated with having as equal a power balance as possible.

All practitioners made reference to the **influence of self** on their ability to work effectively with adults living with HIV.

- Respondents discussed the positive influence of **life experience** and **practice wisdom** on their ability to provide effective practice.
- **Values** were also highlighted as being necessary for effective practice. Practitioners unanimously agreed that their personal and professional values have a positive impact on their ability to provide effective practice.

The **flexible use of a range of different skills** was highlighted as being important.

- These skills were the same regardless of the practitioner role and included counselling, assessment, communication skills, observation skills.

Practitioners identified **specialist knowledge** which they felt helped them to provide effective support:

- In regards to bereavement and death, counselling, philosophy and recent welfare changes.

Practitioners' **views varied regarding the influence of agency, local and national policy on their practice.**

- It was portrayed that all policies are influenced by campaigning bodies who advocate for the rights of adults living with HIV and that these policies provide structure and protection to practitioners.
- In contrast the limitations of local and agency policies were also discussed i.e. tightly configured criteria reducing support available.

The main theme from these discussions was that little importance is placed on policies, although all practitioners were aware that they existed. Higher importance is placed on skills, research relating to HIV treatments and welfare changes, meeting service users' needs and a supportive working environment.

A **supportive organisational culture** was identified by all practitioners as having a positive influence on their ability to provide effective support to adults living with HIV.

- Having the support of team managers, colleagues and the organisation was highlighted as being positive for all practitioners.
- Good **formal and informal supervision** was the main benefit of a supportive organisation.
- Unmotivated staff can make it more difficult to provide effective support.
- **Multiagency support** was valued as sharing knowledge from different professionals provided a more holistic and personalised support service for the adults.

Practitioners highlighted that problems including **HIV related illnesses, alcohol and drug use and poor mental health made it more difficult to provide effective support as the support became more emotive.**

- All practitioners spoke to some extent regarding the emotional implications of working with adults living with HIV.

- All practitioners were clear that providing this support can be difficult and requires time to reflect.

Practitioners were clear that when working with adults living with HIV they face **barriers to providing the support required**; this is due to additional barriers that the adults experience as a result of their HIV diagnosis and other oppressions.

- The recent welfare changes and the criteria set by funders were highlighted as being the barriers which make practice more difficult.
- The additional barriers service users experienced as a result of their diagnosis included having limited support networks due to not disclosing their illness, HIV related illnesses and difficulties accessing services due to low self-esteem.

To provide effective support for adults living with HIV **practitioners require personal coping strategies** due to the adults' complex needs, additional barriers and the emotive nature of the practitioners' roles.

- Coping techniques explored were meditation, mindfulness and self-belief.

The required skills, approaches, and methods practitioners viewed as necessary to support adults living with HIV were similar to the necessities for general social care practice.

Policy and legislation was less valued than research and practice wisdom, although it was clear that policy impacted on practice at an unconscious level. The challenges practitioners experienced related to role boundaries, emotive needs and the continuing trend of HIV stigma and inequalities. This implies that stigma and inequalities are problems those living with HIV are still experiencing. Practitioners require both organisational support and personal coping strategies to practise effectively in such situations.



Implications for Future Policy, Practice and Research:

Future Policy Should Aim To:

- Continue supporting long-term multiagency support
- In relation to statutory social work, practitioners should aim to reduce the power imbalance within their working relationships which is created by the inherent duties placed on them
- Reduce the tight criteria which can result in some adults not receiving a service

Future Practice Should Aim To:

- Provide support on a long term basis using a range of skills and approaches
- Teams, colleagues and organisations should be

supportive and work collaboratively - future practice could benefit from group supervision sessions, team case discussions and regular individual supervision to help practitioners cope with the barriers and challenges of their roles.


- Encourage personal coping strategies which help practitioners to reflect on their practice and maintain a healthy emotional state.

Future Research Should Aim To:

- Explore the views of service users - any adults living with HIV, not only those within a high prevalence group – to ensure the support they are receiving is valuable to them.
- Explore the foundations required to provide long term support, this requirement was a reoccurring theme within the study.

In Conclusion:

This research gained the views of practitioners who currently work with adults living with HIV. The findings suggest that practitioners are passionate and committed to helping the adults live fulfilling lives regardless of their negative experiences of HIV, stigma and inequality. However continuing stigma, inequalities and reducing time and resources is making this more difficult. It is important that organisations, policy and legislation fully support practitioners to provide the complex, emotive and challenging support to adults who are very much in need.



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