Cross-cultural learning in a domestic and family violence agency in Papua New Guinea: Reflections from a Field Placement

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ABSTRACT

With a growing interest in international social work in the tertiary sector, an increasing number of social work students seek field placements overseas to gain cross-cultural experience (Harris et al., 2017). This article reflects on a successful overseas placement of an Australian social work student from James Cook University with the local non-government organization, Femili Papua New Guinea, a case management centre providing support for women and children survivors of family and intimate partner violence based in Lae. The role of partnerships between agencies, including an external supervisor, a medical social worker at the Port Moresby General Hospital Family Support Centre, contributed to a rich learning experience. The article gives perspectives from the key stakeholders – the student, the field educator (an external supervisor) and the university liaison person and placement coordinator. The main learning contexts for this placement included a review of the organisation's policy and guidelines and adding value to service delivery. This provided learning in social justice and the challenges of inequities, injustice and oppression in relation to gender. The importance of prior preparation; the availability of quality supervision by the field educator, support and the personal resilience and resourcefulness of the student are key elements in the placement's success – are all factors to consider when considering overseas placements.

Keywords: *cross-cultural learning; international field placement; Papua New Guinea; domestic and family violence*

BACKGROUND

This article reflects on a successful overseas placement of an Australian social work student from James Cook University and the local non-government organization, Femili, in Lae, Papua New Guinea, a case management centre providing support for women and children survivors of family and intimate partner violence. It is written jointly by the key stakeholders, so the voices of the university liaison person / field education co-ordinator, based in Townsville, Australia; the student, based in Port Moresby; and the field educator (the external supervisor) in Port Moresby, are heard. The role of partnerships between agencies, including an external supervisor, a medical social worker at the Port Moresby General Hospital Family Support Centre, contributed to the student experience. The different support and learning opportunities, the role of technology and attributes of the student that contributed to the success of the placement are discussed. The main learning goals for this placement included a review of the organisation's policy and guidelines. Gaps in policies and service responses to domestic and family violence were identified. How the placement was arranged, reflections from each key stakeholder, and major learnings from this experience are discussed.

The liaison person /field education co-ordinator's experience

The field placement came about after the student requested doing a placement in Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea, where she was residing. The student had been living there for a year and had an interest in working with a family violence service. The student knew some *Tok Pisin*, one of the national languages and was able to suggest an agency, Femili PNG, who were willing to have an Australian social work student.

International student exchanges and field placements have been growing in number in Australian universities; a number of compelling reasons to undertake international social work student exchange reported by Harris et al. (2017, p. 431):

> [T]he enhanced student learning in the intercultural dimensions of social work practice (Bell & Anscombe, 2013), the development of a global understanding of social issues, for instance, gender inequality and environmental degradation (Bell et al., 2015; Boetto, Moorhead, & Bell, 2014), the development of a sense of global citizenship (Trede et al., 2013), and the opportunity to experience different worldviews, to learn different systems of social welfare, and to witness diverse ways to remediate social problems (Schwartz, et al., 2011).

The role of field education co-ordinator for social work students involves negotiating between possible placement agencies, field educators and the students to match the learning needs and interests of the student with the needs and expectations of agencies who agree to take on this task. In considering an overseas placement, a requirement of the James Cook University Field Education was that there must be a suitably qualified and experienced social work supervisor in Papua New Guinea; if not within the placement agency, then available externally. Other considerations included the need for the placement to have a clear learning plan and assessment process as outlined by the university; an experienced and available field educator to provide professional supervision; availability of basic technology such as phone and computer for the student and the university liaison person to have

regular and timely link-ups and feedback; maturity and flexibility of the student working cross-culturally; the willingness of the student to learn some local language whilst doing placement, and the willingness of all stakeholders to work collaboratively (Nickson, Briscoe, Maconachie, & Brosowski, 2011; Nickson, Kuruleca, & Clark, 2009).

The student found a suitably qualified social worker who was working at the Port Moresby Hospital who was delighted to do the external supervision for the placement. Before the placement commenced, the student and supervisor met and arranged regular supervision meetings; dates and meeting times with all parties were arranged well in advance. These were to be by Skype. Femili PNG was very keen to have a student placement and for the project to go ahead.

The university liaison role includes being a support and resource person to both the field educator and the student. The liaison person receives reflective journals from the student on placement as part of their assessment for the university. The student sent the journals to the liaison person by email and prompt feedback was given. Regular links by Skype were arranged to ensure the student was managing the usual demands of a placement in a challenging field of domestic violence, and the demands of working cross-culturally.

As the liaison person / field education co-ordinator, I had some initial concerns about the student's safety and the university's duty of care to a student on a placement. The immense gaps in services and extent of domestic and family violence in Papua New Guinea (Médecins Sans Frontières, 2016) could have the potential to overwhelm a student. However, I was reassured by several characteristics of the student, including the knowledge that the student was already living in Port Moresby, was familiar with the culture and knew some of the language, was of mature age and presented as having flexibility and common-sense. That the placement was a policy review project rather than direct practice provided further safety for the student.

An understanding of policy and the ability to critically analyse policies, systems and structures is an important area of knowledge for practice (AASW, 2013). The proposed policy review which would rely on engagement with staff within the agency, was an excellent opportunity for the student to develop skills in this area of practice with existing organisational policy, which covered how domestic and family violence was viewed and responded to in the Papua New Guinean context. The student had made contact with some experts in Australia for assistance in this domestic violence policy review task and the agency had links to expertise on its management committee. This provided a larger network of supports for the student engaging in the placement tasks.

The student's perspective

Studying as a distance education (external) student at James Cook University in Queensland, I completed the Bachelor of Community Welfare mostly whilst living in the Middle East with my family and a Master of Social Work whilst living in Papua New Guinea. After a year living in Port Moresby with my husband, it was time to do my final field placement and a friend suggested the possibility of doing this at Femili PNG. This local non-government organisation in Lae, was set up in 2014 as a case management centre

to help survivors of domestic and family violence to reach the services they needed. These included medical, legal, government child protection and *seifhaus* (safe houses). I completed a 14-week field placement at Femili PNG.

Context of my direct experience with workers on field placement
On placement, I was responsible for the task of a review of policy guidelines concerning adding value to service delivery and experienced first-hand the work they do there. I spent two weeks with the staff in Lae observing, listening, asking questions about their work and the rest of the time I was based in Port Moresby. This got me thinking about how the task environment impacts organisational process and ways of working. Understanding the "realities of practice" was what I needed to get some grasp on before I was to think about what contributions I could make to the review of service delivery policies based on practitioners' experiences.

Some of my interactions with the case workers were one-to-one, in the office and out on field appointments with clients. Some meetings with service providers were arranged for me to understand their case management processes. In this field work I was to think about how the organisation engages effectively with service co-ordination in providing support for women who want to exit the violence occurring in their lives. I did not want to generalise about what violence is about in Papua New Guinea or make assumptions about what I know about culture, cultural practices and keeping women and children clients safe so I spent a lot of time listening and observing. I learned about the context of practice, coming to an understanding of "the ecological environment of which the client group is part" (Cleak & Wilson, 2007, p. 33). As part of this process, I attended three first-intake interviews. One of the interviews was in *Tok Pisin* and was with a woman who had made a decision to come forward after medical treatment to tell her story with a caseworker. These women come forward because they have decided to think about what their choices might be. The caseworker's commitment to explaining and completing paperwork focused on how the organisation can support a client was explained in a way that was about supporting women to make an informed choice. Permission was given to be present in these interviews taking place in a confidential safe space. The interaction was to hear the woman's story and to think about ways of navigating external service co-ordination for her.

The "Cycle of Violence", also known as the "Cycle of Abuse" (Walker, 2001) is a tool that informs a theoretical perspective on the impact of violence itself and the build-up to the violent behaviour of an abuser. Caseworkers understand the context of the violence women face and discuss the impact of the violence and talk about what the client can to do to increase her safety during a build-up phase or during an active violent event. I witnessed caseworkers talking to women about the patterns of their partners' violent behaviour (Walker, 2001).

Thinking about the context of the work and the context of culture I made no assumptions about the fear and complexity of the violence women in Papua New Guinea experienced. I was mindful not to impose my own values as part of ethical conduct, demonstrating ethical literacy, which includes for workers "to be aware of their own value position, acknowledge judgements and bias and seek to ensure that they do not impose their values on others"

(McAuliffe, 2014, p. 20). Workers acknowledged why it is important that a woman stays with an abusive partner because it can be difficult to imagine a woman's vulnerability leaving her husband, her support and her community (personal conversation with a worker, 2015). In another example I remember meeting a woman and her baby during a visit to a *seifhaus* with Femili PNG's senior social worker. A deep wound still evident across the mother's face and deep wounds still there on the baby's head perpetrated by a neighbour who had entered the woman's house to rape her, this mother and child had been recovering at the *seifhaus* for some weeks. Fighting off the perpetrator they escaped their village travelling by boat with people from her community to get to the nearest major health facility in Lae, the social worker told me. Both were recovering from horrific injuries and were staying at the *seifhaus* to recover and gain some mental stability before working out a future plan for their safety. During our visit there was no referral planning or discussion about what the next steps would be for this woman and child beyond their recovery at the *seifhaus*; although charges for the perpetrators arrest had been laid, I would still not discount the victims' perception of danger and viewed her as the most important source of information for future ways to cope beyond the *seifhaus*. Weekly discussions with the refuge manager were held with the case worker in responding to the client's progress and preparation to leave the *seifhaus*.

The level of experienced violence is very shocking in PNG. Although, in this example the perpetrator was a neighbour, research suggests major injuries and death threats are reported as experienced by women in their homes through intimate partner violence (MSF, 2016). Facilitating escape for all those exposed to harm I acknowledge a deep complexity to the work of case workers who are responding in the work they do with survivors. I was able to debrief with the senior social worker in the organisation and talk about this with my field educator. Having had good support placement networks helped me to maintain a level of resilience.

Case workers support survivors to seek justice regardless of the challenges of the type of violence that presents in case management for clients. Case workers plan for harm minimisation or elimination as much as possible as a very important step in the management process. Critically reflecting on my observations from fieldwork in Lae, I considered the context and how this reflects a reality of practice that connects the fieldwork to the organisation's broader foundation of case management. I used this direct experience with workers to connect both observation and critical reflection to help support the review of policy guidelines with a particular focus on case management policy. Much of the work to inform policy review was in discussion with the wider Femili PNG management team extending from Canberra, Port Moresby and Lae. It was also helpful to connect with former colleagues, supervisors, and people from the domestic violence sector in Australia who identified with the context of the work and were a constant source of information and advice. In addition, I had the regular (external) supervision with my field educator and support from a local social worker in PNG and I was invited to seek support and guidance in my placement. Inter-professional learning and networking was significant for my learning on placement because I learned so much from all the staff, many of whom did not have formal qualifications.

In contributing to the review of case management policies, the typical task environment of the worker was clarified. With permission from the operations manager and senior social

worker, I facilitated a group work activity with the team in Lae that was to identify the typical task environment. This activity reflected Chenoweth and McAuliffe's (2017, p. 225) five aspects of practice in organisations: engagement, assessment, intervention, termination and review. Mapping out the process of case management in the group activity involved writing on several sheets of chart paper tacked to the wall with each worker taking a turn to write down parts of the case management process with the idea documenting the practical experience and practical knowledge of the caseworker. This process provided a way of analysing agency policy and led to strategic planning and developing the human service organisation (Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2017, p. 226).

Discussion began with the clients' point of admission and referral as a triage process to determine client needs and potential benefits from Femili PNG's services by identifying the presenting problem. In the workshop a process was identified and documented for "working with children" in child abuse cases and also a process for working with high-risk women clients for crisis support and emergency accommodation. The skill of this work is that workers continually (every day) assess risk and the documented process of their actions revealed the challenges of this work in practice. Agreeing on a course of action in supporting clients to reach essential services meant that a client's individual plan was regularly reviewed, assessed and adjusted as the stages of assessment, planning, monitoring and evaluation in case management for the care and protection of survivors was documented.

Revealing the challenges and the constraints in monitoring case progress based on practical examples of their experiences highlighted the necessity of building an engagement with stakeholders. Critically reflecting on knowledge as a process is what the caseworkers are learning to adapt themselves to every day in their work. Thinking in a positive way about process was about building on what workers were already achieving in supporting client service responses and to think about process as a way to come up with new ideas and new knowledge.

For the policy review, I was asked to make technical contributions to the policy work already started, critically analysing the policies particular to case management. This was very challenging and time-consuming work. New knowledge meant that I needed to know what to look for in organisational policy in identifying possible gaps that affect service response. This reflected policy analysis at the micro level, in the service delivery at the local community level (Carson & Kerr, 2017, pp. 88–89). Asking for help from management and a social worker from Australia working in the sector made me think about organisational policy that is not just about governance and administration but also about informing what it is the workers do. Taking the practical examples from the group work and fieldwork enabled an understanding of procedures the workers were developing and use that informs organisational method and process. The benefit of direct experience on the field and group work gave meaning to organisational resources that were being provided by the workers themselves informing current working methods and processes as a foundation of case management. These working processes were used in addition to the case management policy shown as flow chart diagrams and descriptions.

I acknowledge that the workers had a natural expression of empathy influencing their values of understanding a person's situation, customary ways and traditions. In whatever I was contributing to, I was continually reflecting on empathy as a concept underpinning everything I did. The diversity of context of environment and culture, along with being a student, meant that my constant thinking and analysis work contributed to a highly productive placement and a unique opportunity I am very grateful to have experienced. Having had the experience of work in the field and collaborative involvement in the review of policies, the message I would like to get out it is that the workers themselves are the organisation's most valuable resource. It is the workers themselves who are working at the critical edge of the continuing development of service response for survivors of family and sexual violence in PNG. The workers are the role models for the success of the organisation in all the work they do. Their thinking, their planning, their influence and collaboration efforts with other services support women to access the services they need. Discussing these options with women is what workers do in helping women to make an informed choice.

Inter-professional learning in an Indigenous culture

As a non-indigenous social work student, I learned from the workers doing their job to support survivors of violence; that is, I gained experience by "doing" – an Indigenous way of learning (Jackson-Barrett, Price, & Stomski, 2015). It has taken time to critically reflect on what I have learned from workers and an understanding of context has taken time to build. Some workers had no formal qualifications, and for those with qualifications, the qualifications varied. It fascinated me to witness how workers were able to adapt their practice to their unique ways of working.

"Mainstream" practices in social work, such as task-centred or narrative approaches (Connolly & Harms, 2009) appeared evident in the caseworkers' ways of working. Perhaps more difficult to identify was an understanding of a theory that was particular to Papua New Guinean customary ways or tribal philosophies. As a white western woman, I was studying from the *outside*. Underlying cultural and gender issues were not discussed with workers (perhaps these were considered not appropriate to share with me, or perhaps it was their tacit knowledge in relation to women's safety in Papua New Guinea).

Comments made in personal conversations with my field educator included that patriarchy is not part of Papua New Guinean culture in responding to gender-based violence, particularly in rural settings. A community's own social systems take care in customary ways, through a "by nature" response (personal conversation with field educator, 2016).

THE FIELD EDUCATOR'S EXPERIENCE

It has been a privilege to provide external supervision to a Master of Social Work student from James Cook University, in Port Moresby under the Social Work Service on a regular basis.

The focus in supervision was providing cultural knowledge, especially on customary marriage, adoption, fostering and child protection practices in Papua New Guinea. Information was provided to the student on areas of research methods to help with understanding the process, method and ideas around "best practice" through observation and analysis.

Providing cultural knowledge

Supervision was centred on providing the student with in-depth knowledge about cultural practices and keeping women and children safe from any form of violence. PNG has a long history of family and tribal support systems relative to providing safety; however, this system is slowly breaking down due to modernisation. The important cultural practice of breaking the cycle of violence in families is that the survivor, usually a woman, seeks family intervention for protection. She seeks refuge at her family home and then her family make certain demands to her abusive husband. Demands are made, for example, in the form of killing pigs and giving these to her family. The husband is to make peace with the woman before she returns to him. This is done to maintain peace and to prevent further violence.

Customary marriage is a recognized form of marriage in PNG. Bride price payments and an exchange of food items are most commonly practised to formally recognise a man and woman as a husband and wife. However, from my practice as a social worker, I have come across cases where husbands have used the bride price payments as a reason to take "ownership" of their wives. It appears that the bride price gives some men a sense of power over their wives, leading to controlling the women and depriving them of their rights. Women are seen as objects and not as equal partners in marriage, leading to psychological and physical abuse, and creating gender-based inequality.

The student was mainly focused on the policy research task whilst on placement, so much of the external supervision was an opportunity for consultation on this and to discuss networking. This included discussion on how to share information with all stakeholders involved in casework.

DISCUSSION

The learning process as an Australian social work student included understanding both the challenges and the opportunities encountered through acknowledging the significance of the cultural differences in the context of practice in Papua New Guinea. Broadly speaking, I think that the Australian social work course as a discipline does make a connection to the work anywhere, because any human service work takes into account social justice and gender perspectives and the impacts of these on society and the person in micro, meso, macro ways. Drawing from direct experience with workers, while there might some similar ways to approach and respond to domestic violence in Papua New Guinea through these fieldwork examples, there were also many different experiences (based on the significance and diversity of culture) for women who came forward. Connecting inter-professional learning, the Australian social work education system and the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) *Code of Ethics* (2010), recognise the importance of working in ways that are respectful, empathetic, culturally competent, safe and sensitive manner with clients from culturally, linguistically and ethnically diverse backgrounds (Bennett, Green, Gilbert, & Bessarab, 2013).

The experience, on placement, of working directly with workers is to know that workers are the best resource to provide new knowledge that informs practice approaches. Drucker (1972) described the exploration of social work in the Pacific as a process of education that

includes the idea that both staff and students are part of a group of colleagues in search of knowledge and skills not common in the region. In their contemporary discussion on social work education and practice in Papua New Guinea, Brydon and Lawihin (2014) note that numerous authors call for the Indigenisation of social work and generally resist the dominance of the western paradigm because there is insufficient clarity about the ways in which this can be achieved. Working collaboratively in complex situations as an "outsider" included working with elements of uncertainty of the cultural dynamics as well as thinking about the role the state plays in responding to gender and violence. Synonymous with Brydon and Lawihin (2014), Duke (2004) also notes the challenges for sustainable solutions across the Pacific, and the need to slowly develop Indigenous technical and professional capacity through quiet example and mentoring. Many conversations, listening, and observing played significant roles during student in-country supervision sessions. As a visiting student, I did not think about counteracting a position of power or privilege in the context of western social work practice compared to if I had been an Indigenous student on placement doing the same tasks. This was not specifically discussed during supervision; however, discussions on cultural knowledge and practices were regularly part of my supervision.

Reflecting on student learning through practical experiences and theoretical knowledge informed by Australian social work curricula, cultural analysis would help to explain the differences in the diverse response experiences of clients that inform practice. Perhaps future discussions on culture; including aspects of racism, colonialism and slavery, are needed to inform mainstream social work practice to tackle institutional change. An inter-disciplinary approach that analyses the different interpretations of what a white, western paradigm of social work is could then learn from an Indigenous-defined perspective of fieldwork practices and ways of doing social work.

CONCLUSION

This field placement worked well for all stakeholders and contributed to the future safety of women and children affected by domestic and family violence who access help through Femili PNG. The key factors which are recommended in considering overseas placements and which contribute to success, are for the placement to be well planned; for an experienced field educator to be available to the student; the willingness of each stakeholder to make it work and the availability of regular link-ups by phone, email or Skype. Important student attributes include a willingness to learn and understand a different culture; having cultural supervision; an openness to acknowledge and utilise the skills and expertise that already exists in the community; flexibility; initiative and resourcefulness; being willing to share the knowledge and skills you have as well as learn from those with whom you are placed; having a desire to contribute to the host organisation and country and having the skills to develop and maintain supportive relationships.

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