

International Social Work in Practice: A Case Study from Northern Uganda

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International social work is gaining recognition as a distinct field of study and practice, and in this process, its meaning continues to be delineated. In this paper, I describe a series of experiences during a summer field practicum coordinating the final phase of a year-long qualitative research study on sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) in Lira, northern Uganda. While not a conclusive statement on the nature of all international social work, this paper presents personal experiences to illustrate how the psychosocial skills, practices, and theory of the social work profession can lend themselves well to the emotional and managerial demands of international work in a post-conflict, developing country context.

IN THE SUMMER OF 2008, FOLLOWING MY FIRST YEAR OF GRADUATE social work studies, I was hired to coordinate the third and final phase of a year-long qualitative research study in Lira, northern Uganda. Undertaken collaboratively between an American university and a prominent international nongovernmental organization (INGO), the study aimed to explore adolescent girls' experiences of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) and to assess relevant support structures in the context of conflict and displacement. Since the early 1980s, civil conflict ravaged northern Uganda, killing thousands and leaving more than 1.8 million people displaced (Integrated Regional Information Networks [IRIN], 2007; Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre [IDMC], 2008). Rape and forced marriage were systematically and widely perpetrated as war tactics, and domestic violence increased due in part to the destruction of many traditional family and community support mechanisms (Annan, Blattman, Carlson, & Mazurana, 2008; Olara, 2004; Patrick, 2005). Despite recent improvements in security that have enabled

many of those who were displaced to begin returning to their home villages, multiple forms of SGBV remain commonplace (IDMC, 2008; IRIN, 2007).

My task in Lira was to supervise four Ugandan research staff in conducting and recording the final round of interviews with study participants.¹ All interviewees were adolescent girls who had been displaced by the region's civil conflict, and half were known survivors of SGBV. I came to the position with previous work experience in Uganda, a background in international public health, and a recently completed social work field placement in domestic violence. While I hoped the summer job would allow me to draw on my earlier professional work while providing hands-on management experience, the opportunity also unexpectedly helped clarify what "international social work" could mean for me in practice. In this paper, I present examples from my experiences in Lira to illustrate how the psychosocial skills, practices, and theory of social work can lend themselves well to the emotional and managerial demands of international work in a post-conflict, developing country context. Looking at my role primarily as one of "helper" in facilitating the completion of a study, I organize this discussion according to the three key phases of the helping process – beginning, middle or work, and ending phases – described in indirect social work practice literature (Birnbaum & Cicchetti, 2005; Hepworth et al., 2006).

The Beginning Phase: Exploration, Engagement, and Planning What is International Social Work?

As I entered graduate school, I was particularly interested in exploring the integration of social work into the international development and humanitarian fields. While much has been written on the subject, the definition of "international social work" continues to be debated. The International Federation of Social Workers (2000) suggests that the social work profession "promotes social change, problems solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being." Within this broad understanding of the profession, definitions of international social work range from a set of specific skills and knowledge, to intercultural exchanges between social workers, to a more general global awareness within the profession (Healy, 2001; Midgley, 2001). Activities can include engaging with international populations domestically, conducting international development work, creating exchanges through international professional journals and meetings, and adapting interventions cross-culturally (Healy, 2001; Midgley, 2001).

Cox and Pawar (2006) build on these definitions by emphasizing the importance of promoting social work education and practice around the world to establish an integrated international profession that can respond appropriately and effectively to ongoing global challenges.

Caragata and Sanchez (2002) suggest that international social work remains largely in the domain of academia, noting that few of the posts within international development agencies are filled by social workers. However, many of the needs identified in the Guidelines on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Emergency Settings,² for instance, point to the strengths of the social work profession, including provision of basic psychosocial services, security measures, and specialized mental healthcare when necessary (Inter-Agency Standing Committee [IASC], 2007). In the sections that follow, I draw on my experiences working with a research team – albeit distinct from strict development or humanitarian work – to contribute to the broader discussion of the meaning and relevance of international social work.

Being Where the Staff Are

I arrived in Lira enthusiastic to meet the research staff and begin our work together. We had only six weeks, and since the staff had all worked on earlier phases of the study, I expected that we could start quickly. Due to funding cuts, however, the INGO had recently laid off three of the four team members. Resources were secured to hire them back as consultants, but only through the duration of the study. At our first meeting, staff were reluctant to engage in discussions about anything but their grievances. They objected to how their terminations were handled, demanded higher salaries, and revealed little interest in introducing me to their earlier work.

In social work, the maxim “being where the client is” implies that a social worker must be attuned to a client’s concerns, expectations, life situation, cultural background, and psychological state, and adjust interventions accordingly (Goldstein, 2001). In some cases, this means addressing immediate matters before more substantive work can occur. Still jet-lagged and having spent weeks preparing for our early meetings, I was admittedly frustrated by how my work with the research team was beginning. Recognizing that to push forward with my own agenda would be both unwise and unsuccessful, though, I tried to “be where the staff were.”

We spent much of our first day together processing what had gone wrong in the past. Given the opportunity to talk openly, some staff eventually began to share deeper issues that were fueling their resentment.

Some of the staff admitted that they felt they had not been offered sufficient input into or ownership over earlier research phases, pointing to the fact that previous interview transcripts were locked in a room they had no access to. Others felt that concerns they had raised to previous staff in my position had not been sufficiently addressed. Taking the time to be where the staff were initially helped me better understand their concerns and expectations, and allowed us to begin to address some of the issues that we had control over. Collaboratively, we established guidelines for how we would work together (including how data would be stored and shared among us); developed contracts specifying expected roles, tasks, and salaries; and agreed to air work-related concerns when they arose. Though time consuming and seemingly slow moving, being where the staff were during our early meetings helped us address underlying concerns, set a precedent for tackling future problems, and helped us arrive at a place where we could move forward with our principal work.

The Work Phase: Implementation and Goal Attainment Self-care and Staff Well-being

The methodology used in our study involved traveling long distances – often by a combination of car, bicycle, and foot – to conduct extensive interviews with adolescent girls affected by conflict and SGBV, most of whom had recently left internally displaced person camps to resettle in remote villages. Interviewees were also facing a number of other difficulties: most were not in school because their families could or would not pay their school fees, many were having difficulty feeding their own young children because of a recent drought, and some faced ongoing domestic abuse. A smaller number of the participants were suffering from serious psychological distress or medical conditions, including HIV. Though safety in northern Uganda had significantly improved by the summer of 2008, rumors of re-insurgency were not uncommon. At times the researchers and I were left feeling powerless against these considerable systemic obstacles.

To prevent burnout and the vicarious trauma that can result from exposure to such difficult circumstances, social work promotes the importance of maintaining staff wellness through a combination of self-care and organizational responsiveness (Clemans, 2004; Pross, 2006). Given the challenging context and content of our study, the research staff and I established a plan to regularly check safety updates, set a norm that no one would travel to a place where they

felt unsafe, and agreed to the importance of establishing a work/life balance. In my own experience working at an agency serving domestic violence survivors, I had also found group debriefings valuable for reflecting on the emotional nature of the work (Clemans, 2004). Some of the research staff also suggested such debriefs, so we agreed to meet periodically as a group to express and share our experiences (United Nations High Commission on Refugees [UNHCR], 2001). Doing so was helpful, enabling us to discuss the importance of establishing boundaries with interviewees despite our natural desire to assist them beyond our means, and to reflect on what we could do. Together we developed a list of interviewees with acute needs, should discrete funding become available to assist them; identified referral sources including free or low-cost HIV services, village-based social workers, and a regional hospital with a psychiatrist on staff; and we brainstormed ideas for more sustainable programs that could address the needs of study participants.

Supportive Supervision

Social work also places importance on individual supportive supervision, in which a supervisor is concerned with decreasing job-related stress, and enhancing skills, knowledge, and positive attitudes toward work (Coleman, 2003). Such supervision, offered in a culturally appropriate manner, might have been useful for the research staff whose jobs required intimate conversations with SGBV survivors, and who had themselves lived through the region's conflict. Given the complexities of managing a team from a different culture, working for the first time in a post-conflict setting, and hearing daily stories of significant trauma, I certainly would have benefited from supportive supervision as well. Unfortunately, such support was not available within the context of our study or in the INGO partner office more broadly.

Promoting Critical Reflection

As I reviewed interview transcripts from earlier research phases, I noticed that the researchers often seemed to stifle or overtly direct interviewees' responses. Researchers tended to rely on close-ended questions, leading interviewees to stop when they might have had more to say. They also stacked questions, making it difficult for interviewees to know which to respond to first and they frequently revealed their own personal feelings about an issue, potentially hindering in-

interviewees from sharing their own experiences and perspectives.

Process recordings, which require students to reflect critically with a trained supervisor on interactions with clients, are an important aspect of social work training (Neuman & Friedman, 1997). I found that adapting the process recording tool was also helpful in working with research staff to improve data collection. The researchers and I reviewed their earlier interview transcripts together, exploring why they might have asked a question in a particular way, what the implications might be for interviewees' replies, and how they could support more free-flowing interviewee responses. In some cases, I learned that cultural norms dictated the interviewing style that a researcher had chosen. In others, by dissecting and analyzing their communication through this adaptation of a simple social work learning tool, the research staff seemed to become more aware of their own roles in shaping interviewee responses. Eventually, this practice helped improve the data that we collected and, more importantly, created a space for interviewees to more freely share their stories.

The Ending Phase: Termination

Given the emotional content of their discussions and the fact that our research involved intense contact and disclosure over an extended period of time, many of the researcher/interviewee relationships had become quite close (Bordeau, 2000). One interviewee had named her daughter after a research staff member, others had invited researchers to their wedding ceremonies. The research staff similarly shared that they had become attached to the interviewees and felt guilty about leaving them once the study ended.

Bordeau (2000) suggests that the sensitive nature of some qualitative research can contribute to many of the same dynamics of a therapeutic relationship. In direct social work practice, termination refers to the process of formally ending a social worker/client relationship. Ideally, this process recognizes that separation involves mixed feelings for both social workers and clients, and helps prepare clients for a future in which the gains from the social work relationship will be maintained (Hepworth et al., 2006). While not required as part of the study, facilitating appropriate and meaningful termination between researchers and interviewees seemed important given that we were conducting the final phase of a year-long study, during which close relationships had developed.

Early on, the research team and I began to discuss how interview-

ees and the staff themselves might feel about and react to the study ending. As a result of these discussions, we added space at the end of our interview guide for researchers to share what they had gained from the year-long process, as well as explicit questions to allow interviewees to discuss their feelings about ending. Some interviewees chose not to use this time, but others shared many feelings, including sadness, disappointment, contentment, or hope for the future. To address some of these feelings and draw on a strengths perspective, which asserts that the strengths and resources of people in their environments rather than their problems or deficits should be the focus of the helping process, we also devoted time to helping interviewees identify strengths and supports that they could call upon after the study was over (Chapin, 1995). Combined, these efforts helped us actively prepare for and make more meaningful the study's inevitable ending.

Recommendations

Though neither a statement on what all international social work is or should be, nor a complete description of my work in Lira, I have sought to provide just a few examples of how social work tools and frameworks influenced my efforts to facilitate group cohesion, problem-solving, and the completion of research in an international context. In hindsight, I might have applied lessons from social work even further; facilitating, for instance, more explicit group discussions about how individual, cultural, and social power dynamics affected my relationship – as a white supervisor from an American university – with the Ugandan research staff, as well the relationships of interviewees – mostly poor with limited formal education – with the university-educated researchers (Sakamoto & Pitner, 2005).

More than any academic exploration of international social work could, reflecting on both what I did and what I might have done differently in Lira has helped me clarify the potential that social work has to contribute to both the managerial and technical aspects of work in an international context. To further move international social work from an academic debate to a more recognized and relevant field of practice, a combination of action, promotion, and education is needed (Cox & Power, 2006). When appropriate, traditional social work interventions, tools, and methods of supervision can be thoughtfully adapted to new professional and cultural contexts. Social workers currently in the humanitarian and development fields should do more to articulate and promote the advantages that our professional training brings to bear. Social work schools and professional associations must offer more international field practica to help students and

recent graduates learn to apply the skills gained from courses and domestic fieldwork. Though neither academic study nor short-term practicum opportunities alone can ensure culturally sensitive, high quality, and locally appropriate international efforts, such opportunities have the potential to considerably benefit students, the social work profession, and the international community more broadly.

Notes

- 1 Throughout this paper, “study participants” and “interviewees” are used interchangeably.
- 2 The IASC issued these draft Guidelines in 2007 with the stated goal of enabling humanitarian actors to “plan, establish and coordinate a set of minimum multi-sectoral responses to protect and improve people’s mental health and psychosocial wellbeing in the midst of an emergency” (IASC, 2007, p. v).

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