

Challenges of Social Work Student Conducts A Practice on Family in Context of “Relationship of Social Worker – Client”

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Abstract

Field work in the field of social work is vital to support the application of learning in the class to the form of skills through experience with clients. The core of this study is to examine the challenges faced by the two cohorts of final year students of the social work undergraduate program in building relationships with clients while conducting fieldwork with child and family client. This research applied a qualitative method with a grounded theory approach as the study design. The data collection techniques are through document analysis and Focus Group Discussion (FGD). A total of 37 field work reflection documents written by the first cohort students are analysed to obtain the initial themes related to challenges of social worker-client relationships while 62 second cohort social work students were involved as focus group informants to get more in-depth information. The findings show that there are 5 main issues of challenges of social worker-client relationship namely (i) difficulty building trust because clients lack knowledge about social work (ii) projection towards the agency of social welfare (iii) limited relationship with certain family members (iv) denial of parenting style problem (v) authority of discussion distorted to advice. All identified challenges associated with the society's understanding of the social work profession itself and few ethics issues are also discussed.

Keywords: Field Work, Reflection, Social Work-Family Relationship, Self-Efficacy, Focus Group Discussion

Introduction

Bachelor's degree study in the social work field is a basic platform to gain acknowledgement as a social worker. Social work graduates are expected to be able to perform various case interventions as stated by social work scholar, Zastrow (2009), that a social worker has been trained to work skilfully with various individual's problem, families, groups, organisations, and communities. Field work is recognised as a key component for students to gain a better understanding and skills application in-person related to the subject studied (Flanagan &

Wilson, 2018). As stated by Bogo (2015) for clinical social work, the ability of social work education to graduate ethical, competent, innovative, effective social workers is highly reliant on the quality of the field experience (Amadasun, 2021). Kanno and Koeske (2010) show that student's negative emotions, low self-confidence and anxiety are able to influence learning quality and competency when performing practice. According to Kerner.M et al. (2017), social worker students value learning from experiences in the field, feedback on skill development, and the opportunity to process what they experienced in the field. Field work has been part of practice in the social work field and is the main component that connected social work education with the implementation of social work. Hepworth et al (2002) suggested that social work provides an opportunity to integrate theory and practice. Through field work as well, students will learn more about the reality of dealing with clients especially in managing social worker-client relationships during the assistance process.

The social worker-client relationship is fundamental to the assistance process (Trevithick, 2003) and central to social work purpose and identity (Wendy Rollins, 2020). Most theories such as Crisis Theory, Role Theory, System Theory, Symbolic Interaction Theory and others applied in social work recognize the importance of building relationships regardless of whether the theory discusses directly or indirectly the relationship with a client. While various practice theories such as Client-Centered Therapy proposed by Carl Rogers specifically emphasize the relationship between therapist with a client. Relationship based-practice can be associated with the client-centered approach (Coady et al, 2016) with the philosophy that individuals have their own beliefs, self-motivation and choices of their own action. Therefore, the client needs to be treated as an individual and should be given the opportunity to achieve self-potential (Howe, 2009). Similarly, with social work scholar who being called social case mother, Mary Richmon prioritized the case worker-client relationship in social work treatment sessions (Procto, 1982).

In the field of social work, it is believed that a positive social work-client relationship will drive the client towards expanding the space of help and consistency towards change. A study by The Centre of Mental Health in United Kingdom has found that social worker-client relationships are crucial in increasing the number of client attending programs that can support them to respond to child behaviour problems (Mc Noill, 2012). However, social work undergraduate students are a group who still lack of exposure to practice in this field. Studies by Chui (2010) as well as Clark and Smith (2012) indicates that social work students experienced difficulties while conducting field work where a student reports doubtful self-esteem and anxiety. Therefore, certainly, there are challenges in building social worker-client relationships while conducting the practice in field. Moreover, the field of social work in Malaysia is considered still new and society in this country still lacks of knowledge of the profession of social work itself. The implication is, there are many constraints that the students have to face while doing fieldwork. This causes students to feel uncertain to handle the cases because they are not trained and less encouragement from the beginning. Previous works of literature have examined the challenges of the social worker-client relationship such as study by Alexander and Charles (2009), Coady and Nick (1993) and Sarah (2006) which focused on social work practitioners and very few studies involving social work student. Moreover, local researches still not much review on this issue while the information is important to help administrators in the field of social work education be prepared to face the present challenges and can help the student make mental and psychological preparation.

Research Method**Research Design**

This study applied a qualitative method with a grounded theory approach to understand the challenges that focus on the relationship of social worker-client through the experience of informants.

Research Sample

The informant in this research is a final year student of the Social Work Programme who registers for the Individual and Family Social Work course and is involved in doing field work to meet the course requirement. The first group categorized as cohort 1 was a total of 37 students, while the second group named cohort 2 involved 9 Focus Group Discussion (FGD) of 62 informants.

Procedure

All informants are required to meet with the client periodically at least three times meeting visit to the house. This is to acquaint students with the experience of being in the initial phase, middle phase until the planning phase in the help process. The selection of clients is through the suggestion by the supervisor at the Children's Activity Centre for the first cohort while the second cohort was given the freedom to find their own clients consisting of families around Bandar Baru Bangi. Then, the researcher held a focus group discussion (FGD) to a total of 62 students who were divided into 9 groups FGD to understand comprehensively the challenges and then discussed the agreement of the identified themes through the first cohort and checked if there are any new themes emerge in the data. This can further increase the credibility of the research data.

Analysis

A total of 37 student reflection documents were analysed using thematic analysis to discover initial themes related to challenges faced by the informants. The thematic analysis also was applied in the analysis of 9 documents of FGD results that have been transcribed.

Findings

Through the result of the first cohort informant document analysis, there are ten initial themes have been identified as the challenges of the case worker-client relationship. Then, four additional themes emerged as a result of the focus group discussion by the second cohort making all themes a total of 14. After the data reduction, all the themes were rearranged and then categorized into five main themes with 14 subthemes of challenges of the social worker-family relationship. The 5 themes are (i) difficulty building trust because clients lack knowledge about social work (ii) projection towards the agency of social welfare (iii) limited relationship with certain family members (iv) denial of parenting style problem (v) authority of discussion distorted to advice has been agreed as a challenge for the social work students during the field work. Table 1.1 shows how the initial themes form into the main themes in identifying the challenges experienced by social work students.

Table 1.1:

Theme Formation of Challenges of Case Worker-Client Relationship during the Field Work Practice

	Initial subthemes (analysis of reflection document cohort 1)	Subthemes (Focus Group Discussion Cohort 2; Agreement towards the initial subthemes and additional themes)	Themes agreed between two cohorts (data credibility; <i>members checked-verbal</i>)
1	Parents are hesitant to provide information	Parents are hesitant to provide information	1. difficulty building trust because clients lack knowledge about social work
2	Parents clients ask a variety of questions that shows worried	Parents client ask a variety of questions that shows worried	
3	Long rapport with a child client	-	
4	Parents clients are unaware of social work field and its relation to assist client	Parents clients are unaware of social work field and its relation to assist client	
5	Client considered informants as representative of welfare agency	Client considered informants as representative of welfare agency	2. projection towards the agency of social welfare
6	-	Client express their disappointment at not being able to receive government aid	
7	Client complains about government issues and policy	Client complains about government issues and policy	
8	-	Client didn't get cooperation from other family members	3. limited relationship with certain family members
9	Mother client who involved more in discussion compare to father client	Mother client who involved more in discussion compare to father client	
10	Parents are not interested in family therapy but requested the child to be involved	Parents are not interested with family therapy but requested the child to be involved	
11	Parents clients consider only their child are problematic	Parents clients consider only their child are problematic	4. denial of parenting style problem

12	Uncomfortable when the informant touches on family functionality	Uncomfortable when the informant touches on family functionality	
13	-	Clients share more about their life	5. authority of discussion distorted to advice
14	-	Clients give a lot of advices through the discussion session to the informants	

Difficulty building trust because clients lack knowledge about social work

Most informants experienced difficulty building trust at the initial stage as their presence is questionable by the family. Furthermore, the family has limited knowledge of social work study, causing the informants to explain the study field first until the trust is gained from the client. The informant of group 8 experienced in managing client who asked about social work study at the beginning of the meeting. According to the informant, parents clients consider this field as volunteerism study and not a professional field;

"The first time we met the client, the client asked about our course and they are not aware of the social work field. The client thought social work is volunteering work and not a professional field as other professions. It looks like we just helping in doing voluntary works. When we explained about social work, they at last have a little bit of knowledge about social work"

For informant of group two, even though they have explained a few times about social work to the client, but they still find it difficult to understand and still consider the presence of informants is to provide counselling;

"When we first met, we received a lot of questions about social work. Even though we have explained for the few times. They still did not get the idea of social work. At first, they thought we are volunteers. And then they thought we came to provide counselling ... They said they are familiar if it is about volunteering"

Therefore, most informants started the relationship by taking the time to explain about the social work study. Informant of group 9 stated that they took some time to explain to the family about their study field;

"At the beginning of the session, we explained briefly to the client about our role, and the do and don't of what the client and I should do in the process of helping. But, the family said, they are unaware of social work, and that's why we took a long time to explain to the family about this field"

According to the informant, among the possibilities this issue occurs is because they are still a student and still lack of experience in dealing with the family. However, they try to control the situation by convincing the client about the purpose of their presence in the field as stated by the informant of group 4;

"... clients are less confident with us because we are still students, we are inexperienced to handle the case. But, one of our group members managed to convince the client, so clients began to feel comfortable sharing their problem with us"

However, there are parents client who still show concern about the content of the interview even though they have starting to understand the field of social work. For some clients, they

feel uneasy about the interview questions by the informant and it causes them to ask first the purpose of the question being asked. The informant of group 5 informed his client keeps on asking about the purpose of every question asked to them as informant statement; *"based on the meeting we conducted, our client seem very worried with our presence. Our clients obviously look worried about questions we will ask. The client often asked 'what's the next question? For what purpose? and others'"*

For the informant of group eight, mother client concerns were about the informants' question skills. The client of this group is worried that her children will experience emotional disturbance when interviewed by the informant as stated by the informant; *"our client's mother is too worried about her child safety. She asked us a few questions because she is uncertain, maybe because we are still students. So, the client's mother finds it quite difficult to cooperate and is anxious, hesitant that her child will experience emotional disturbance if meet with us"*

The experience faced by group three is more challenging because there are clients who are not interested to know about the field of social work and assume that the field of social sciences is futureless in Malaysia as the statement *"during the interview session, the client asked about our field of study and our future plan. The client said social sciences study has no job opportunities, especially in Malaysia. Clients are also not interested in knowing more about social work when we want to explain about social work"*.

Projection towards the agency of social welfare

This study also discovered that there are clients who expected that the presence of informants is from a welfare agency. Therefore, the expression of problem-related to dissatisfaction with the government and the disappointment of not getting welfare aid is often expressed. The informant of group 8 said that client assumed that their presence was from the Social Welfare Department which was responsible to become aware of client family's problem *"The client thought we are JKM officers who came to discover for the client's family problem. They have never heard about social work, they only know about counselling"*. The informant of group six also admitted that their client who was a disabled person (OKU) considered that informant was from Social Welfare Department. The client continuous to expect help to be considered again and given to him;

"The client is a person with disabilities who still has a husband but lives alone. The first challenge we faced was the client's assumption of our presence during the first time meeting because the client thought we came to provide welfare assistance. The client was much hope for welfare help from Social Welfare Department (JKM). She applied for it before, but was rejected because she still has a husband and children even though they had left her alone. So, this aunty begged us"

Besides that, most informants agreed that the client also expressed their disappointment to the government. Informant's presence to the client's house seems to be a place to release all the dissatisfactions that they been restrained in the government all this time. A client of group seven was found not to communicated his unhappiness with the government's aid to family members, instead he shared a lot with informants.

"The client expressed dissatisfaction with the current issues that emerged in the newspapers such as BR1M issue to us. He said he prefers not to share it with his family."

All decisions and family matters are left to the wife. That's why when we came he complained a lot of things about disappointment with the government ..."

Even though a lot of criticisms were put forward, but informant didn't look at it as an advantage to gain the trust of the client to build relationships. The informant is just a listener and always focusses on the main purpose which is to conduct field work.

"Our client, complained a lot about government policy. Maybe because the client once served in the government sector, a retired teacher. The client always keeps himself updated with current issues. So, there are a lot of disappointments that he shared with us. But, we didn't comment much on it, we prefer to be a listener. Because we have a goal for the meeting"

Limited relationship with certain family members

The results of the analysis also indicate that most of the relationships that take place between social workers and clients did not involve all of the family members or client's households but only participated by certain family members. The mother is the family member who interacts more and has a closer relationship with the informant compares to the father. Whereas father client was less interested to get involved with the meeting even though the meeting was held at the client's house; *"More or less 6 meetings I have conducted, but client's father only attended two sessions, so that is why I had a limitation to communicate well with the client's father"*

However, there are also fathers who are busy working till they were absent during the home visit. According to the informant of group 5, the client maybe gave full trust to the mother to get engage in the session by the informant;

"My interaction with the client's father was very limited because the father was busy with work and handing over this matter to his wife. So, it was quite difficult for me to get information from the client's father. I also didn't communicate much with their children and only received a lot of information from the mother".

Undeniably, that most father client leave the responsibilities of discussion with the social worker to the mother client. In this matter, father client followed a lot of the mother's decision especially in the planning discussion that involved the child as stated by the informant of group 6 *"The mother spent more time with social workers because the father assumed this responsibility more to his wife and the father followed the mother's decisions in their child's matter"*. Similarly, the experience of the informant of group 3 that stated that the mothers were more dominant in the topics in the interviews conducted *"in the interview held, the mother dominated the topic. The father was not given space to speak up. The father rather be silent. If we asked, the father will ask the mother to answer"*.

Other than that, there are also a group of informants who only can involve certain clients such as single mothers who are old without getting cooperation from other family members. When we want to set an appointment to meet, various reasons given to avoid getting involved in the family intervention process. The informant of group 6 revealed, *"we sent messages, WhatsApp many times, but the client didn't respond. We wanted to discuss about the mother, but maybe because we are students, so he refused to cooperate"*. According to other informants in the same group, this is likely because the client not being demotivated because

they feel unmotivated to engage in the session with informants who are a student. *"maybe he was discouraged, they didn't get any advantage to talk to us ... maybe that's what the client felt"*.

Denial of parenting style problem

Most informants agree that the challenge of building a social worker-client relationship also involves the client's discomfort when asked about parenting styles such as punishment or house rule. The informant of group 2 stated, *"It can be seen client seem surprised when we asked various questions related to the house rules, asked about the parenting, and we are student, so yes ..."* Moreover, when we asked questions related to her partner, the client seems uncomfortable and only share a little causing the informant unable to dig into the problems related to parenting style, *"When we asked about the husband, it was obvious that the client tried to avoid. It seems she refused to share more. The clients only share about the children ..."*

From the opinion of the informant of group three, clients view the mistakes as their children's not theirs.

"The client considered their child more problematic and all the children's problems caused by the children themselves. The client thought they have done their best for the child, the child was the one who could not accept. The child was labelled mischievous and stubborn. But in fact, the parents who refused to understand the growing child through the transition of childhood stage to teenage who are often rebellious"

However, informants received a lot of information related to the functionality of the family by asking the children. The informant of group 1 explained;

"Indeed, we have to ask the children about this parenting style. They shared more stories, at the beginning, it was hard to build a relationship with the children, but when we were closed, the kids will feel comfortable and start to share stories about their family"

Besides that, there are times when the informants want to explain the result of the assessment of the parenting style practiced by the client, however, they have to cancelled their desire because they were worried that their relationship will become less comfortable, *"The client's parents are focusing more on the client's problem compare to the parenting style applied. I found the client's parents are too obedient to the client and were afraid to be firm on the client. But I was not brave enough to tell them, because I am afraid that it will not be accepted by the client, and the client will react negatively with our group"*.

Authority of discussion distorted to advices

Besides that, the challenges of the social worker-client relationship are related to the authority of discussion. The authority of discussion between social worker-client is more driven by the client than the informant. The informant of group 3 admits that when discussing with clients about intervention plans, various advice is given by the parents client; *"it's like we said something, but we haven't done explained yet, they gave us advice about our course, about our future and life"*

The informant of group 2 also disclosed that this situation caused discomfort and caused not much discussion about intervention plan that could be done on the family. For informant of

group 8 stated that this situation caused difficulties in the relationship even though the informants listen to the advice given;

“when the client starts to give us advice, it will be hard for us to include our point in the conversation. It was certainly difficult, feel ashamed, mainly when we discussed the parenting style, we are a student, want to discuss about parenting style, family functionality, at last, we had to listen to the client’s advice”.

The informant of group 5 stated this situation is due to the fact that the client’s opinion that believed informants as a student who still needs guidance. Their intentions are pure, but the informants feel that the relationship does not seem to be a social worker-client relationship;

“We working based on the timeframe, we want to explore, identify the problem, then start planning as soon as we can. We have to set an appointment to meet, and it will be waste of time if we take hours to conduct the interview, the clients certainly could not tolerate it. So, if the time has been used to give advice to us, things would be different. We understood their intentions is good not otherwise”.

Discussion

In conclusion, to build the social worker-client relationship, students who conducting field work experienced various challenges in terms of trust, expectations, parenting style, cooperation and authority of discussion. The important results of this research show that the client’s knowledge and understanding of the field of social work itself is the main factor that becomes the challenge in building the social worker-client relationship. The client’s understanding of the field of social work is essential as it will affect the relationship and the helping process. However, through the findings of this research, the beginning phase in building a social worker-client requires students to seek the client’s trust by providing information about the field of social work to them. Once the client was informed about the field, then the client’s acceptance and trust are seen to be better. The failure to gain the client’s trust will not only affect the phase of relationship building, but also affect the assessment phase such as less cooperation that can be given by the whole family member mainly the father. This scene eventually leads to the planning phase whereas in developing an intervention plan including conducting family therapy, the cooperation from all family members is very important.

Besides that, the challenges that have been identified through this research can also be applicable to the professional border issue. The challenges faced in the social worker-client relationship associated with the authority of the discussion were found distorted to giving advice by the client, showing the existence of power imbalance in this relationship. Informant seems to agree on discussions that are more dominated by the client including listening to various client’s advice. Even though in this research, the informant is still a student, but this issue demands attention, if there is a negative reaction shown in the field of social work study by the student. If there are too many negative reactions, this will reduce the self-efficacy of students who will graduate as social workers later. Apart from that, in order to maintain relationships with clients, social workers often share some personal information and maybe engage in self-disclosure. In this study, students who present themselves had to answer various questions in an effort to introduce the field of social work until there is a client asked about their plan after graduated. According to Farah (2012) the risk of self-disclosure if not controlled can lead to a shift in the professional relationships that focuses on the needs of

social workers than the client's needs. Although in the beginning, it is appropriate at the building relationship phase, but self-disclosure if not restrained can cause various negative risks.

In practical reality, students actually have an ethical duty to act best on the client and are responsible for strengthening and maintaining professional boundaries. However, a study conducted by Williams et.al, 2002 shows that social work students who are not used exposed to practice learning, are lack self-efficacy than the student who is familiar with field work practice. It can be seen in this study, that students find it quite difficult to discuss professionally the goals of field work and the role of the social workers to their clients, mainly parents clients to strengthen professional boundaries. Therefore, the frequency of field work is good to be implemented for social work students because it is a practical learning experience that can enhance self-efficacy. In this study as well, the challenges experienced by students in building social worker-client relationships also involve the Rosenthal Effect. It is an assessment in which an individual tends to see or evaluate something as the client wants due to the sense of liking and respect (Gambriel, 2012). Even though in this issue, students know the existence of dysfunction in the family mainly in the aspect of parenting style, but students are not able to inform it as a result of assessment that has been performed to plan the intervention. The findings show that the student tends to highlight issues that they feel are acceptable to the client due to feeling of respect to the client or worry that problems will arise in their relationship with the client to the point of affecting the opportunity to complete assignments assigned by the lecturer.

Conclusion

Therefore, it is crucial for all parties directly related to the field of social work to empower the effort to introduce this field in the eyes of society. Society will not question the presence of social work students who want to conduct a practice to do a home visits for field work if they understand and aware of the role of a social worker. This research data that revealed the relationship with clients who see students as a projection towards social welfare agency is also the indicator that society still considered social work as an agency that provides financial assistance and voluntary work. So, it is important the society is exposed to exact information related to the field of social work which has a broader role and important in rebuilding the life of society towards well-being. The social work profession needs to be raised to a professional career field because the willingness of trained social work students to serve the community has been wasted intentionally if there is no space to practice it. With the recognition by society, so will give a positive impact on social development as a whole.

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