

Reflecting on the research on How Australia's deteriorating Relationship with China Has Affected Chinese Students at the University of Sydney Since the Pandemic

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Abstract

This paper draws on an assessment task within a Bachelor of Social Work program. The unit aims to help students develop an understanding of the ways social workers use research in different practice contexts: assessing community needs, formulating policies, developing new services, evaluating programs, enhancing social work practice and developing theory. Students are introduced to quantitative and qualitative approaches and methods in social work research, in the context of specific practice fields including mental health, domestic violence, community development and policy advocacy. The unit required students to develop and implement a small-scale research project. This paper includes a discussion of what worked well, what could be change in the future and a reflection on how research skills may be useful for future practice as social workers.

Keywords

Research; Chinese; Australian; students; pandemic.

Research in social work

Research aims to reveal social inequalities to the attention of relevant agencies to work against the internalization of unequal power structures, recognize vulnerable groups, and support them to ensure inequality will not be reproduced, which is the responsibility of social workers. Anyone is capable of and ought to do social research. We are all doing research subconsciously everywhere and at all times (Connell, 1974). We observe and collect information to reach our different goals. Although conducting research may sound specialized and complex, it is not as unreachable as the public may believe. Quite the contrary, research is recurrent and critical in almost every field, especially in the profession of social work, which I had not realized as well until I completed this research on my own.

When conducting research regarding social work, a thoughtful design is critical, including the methodology, ethical issues, sample recruitment, data collection, and analysis technique, because these details determine the quality of the research, the care for participants, and the accuracy of the results. Therefore, this reflection focuses on my experience of conducting the research. Before reflecting on my first research project, I need to emphasize what this attempt has taught me: the meaning and significance of the research for my future social work profession. In this paper I focus on key aspects of research: the choice of method; the sample construction; and the ethical use of self-disclosure.

Significance of my study

My research question was *'How has the deteriorating relationship between Australia and China affected Chinese students at the University of Sydney since the pandemic?'*. The study was intended to investigate the influences on their health conditions, including physical, mental, spiritual, and social well-being. Chinese students make up a sizable population in Australia, particularly at the University of Sydney, and they have made substantial economic and social contributions to the country's higher education sector. According to official figures, more than twice as many Chinese students are studying abroad in Australia as Indian students, who come in second place. About 24% of students at the University of Sydney are Chinese, which is a very

sizable proportion (Zhai, Gao & Wang, 2019). However, despite their contribution, Chinese students continue to be rejected and alienated, as shown in real life and the media (Bista, 2018). Chinese students have been marginalized long before the pandemic due to a variety of causes. God & Zhang (2019) argue that China and Australia have a divergence of values and ideologies which can impact on Chinese students in Australia, leading them to being rejected. Chinese students can find it challenging to integrate into Australian society and engage in cross-cultural interactions, which alienates them and creates a vicious cycle.

This process of alienation has been significantly impacted by the deterioration of relations between Australia and China. After Covid destroyed their relationship, the crisis for Chinese students in Australia worsened, and they were forced to deal with local and foreign pressures simultaneously. Chinese students in Australia are thus in a predicament, given these circumstances. Some Australians view them as enemies and carriers of the Covid viruses, leading to further rejection and estrangement. On the other hand, the Chinese accuse them of leaving China because they believe western ideologies influenced them. It appears that Australian university qualifications are becoming less respected by Chinese society and companies. The border closures created further challenges for Chinese students, with low online learning engagement, sarcasm from the outside, and a lack of social interaction. As a result, many of them have struggled over the previous two years with persistent anxiety and sadness. Their mental health, sense of belonging, and social well-being is all profoundly impacted by doubts and blame—both from within and from without.

My research project

To conduct the research, I decided to use a qualitative methodology, a method well suited to interpreting phenomena from real-world settings from the meanings people bring to them (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Although some might argue quantitative research that measures and test variables is more objective and straightforward in terms of the data, since my project mainly focused on personal experiences and feelings interviews are much more suitable than surveys or questionnaires to understand participants' perceptions (D'Cruz & Jones, 2014). Moreover, the collected data can be analyzed by theme and reported in the language of the informants

(Minichiello et al., 1990). However, limitations of qualitative research are also apparent, particularly in validity and reliability. Qualitative research tends to have a smaller sample size due to time and cost. It can lack replicability because of the complex and distinct contexts, situations, interactions, etc., which may cause the outcome to be one-sided. In addition, the researcher (myself) tends to play a predominant role as my choices determine the process and consequences of the qualitative research. After weighing the pros and cons, I eventually decided on collecting qualitative data through an in-depth semi-structured interview to allow interviewees to express themselves freely. This approach would not limit our interview content. A qualitative approach was a good choice as it allows understanding to be developed inductively by focusing on the participants subjective feelings and experiences, highlighted the importance of the specific context, and generated new unresearched aspects (D’Cruz & Jones, 2014).

For the sample, I planned to recruit two undergraduate international students from China currently enrolled at the University of Sydney who have experience living in both China and Australia since the global outbreak of COVID-19. These Chinese students were new to Australia and had not been living in Australia (Sydney) before, or only for a short time. The small sample size reflected by scope of the assessment task which was to be a small-scale project. I chose to include undergraduate students as I believed undergraduate students are young and likely to be more sensitive and intolerant of unfair treatment and other’s views, unlike graduate students who might be older. The focus on younger students allowed emotional experiences and opinions to be included in the research. Lastly, both Chinese and Australian attitudes toward international students changed significantly after the epidemic, so those who have lived in both countries after the epidemic have comprehensive experiences and understandings, especially after the Australian border was reopened. By conducting an in-depth interview with two Chinese undergraduate students I recruited through WeChat (a popular social media platform among Chinese), we discussed their experiences in China and Australia in the past two years, especially the three stages: the period after the virus outbreak, distance learning at home, and the life after arriving in Sydney. I hope that this sample would enable more detailed and authentic research outcomes (Shaw & Holland, 2014).

Ethical issues

In terms of ethical issues, all conceivable aspects were covered as they function as a base for conducting research. During my research process, confidentiality, non-maleficence, beneficence, equality, and justice are highly valued as social work values emphasize trust and respect for individuals, social justice, and professional integrity (AASW, 2020). Because of this, the participation was voluntary and anonymous, and it was full of reciprocity instead of unilateral access to information (Beauchamp in Alston & Bowles, 2003). Each participant was asked for consent and informed of the whole research plan. Moreover, the entire research content was recorded and reviewed to guarantee that it led to an accurate outcome. My most concerning ethical dilemma was the possibility that my research process would offend the participants' privacy and remind them of the trauma during that challenging period. Although the object of research is not to solve or fix, compassion is significant to social workers as the role of social workers is to maximize societal well-being (Parrish, 2014). Since the topic involved discriminatory encounters, I initially tried to avoid content that evokes painful memories, although it was unavoidable because that is what this was the focus of the research. Thus, I tried to focus on the experience rather than feelings in my questions. During the interview, I always attempted to keep an equal, respectful, and trustworthy attitude toward the interviewees, and I ended up comforting them with my own experience. The decision to disclose my own experiences of discrimination and alienation as a Chinese student was difficult. I was also traumatized but self-doubting about how this would affect my research, but I realized that I should not deny my identity because of other people's negative opinions. It was surprising to me that recognition is important for participants and researchers in interviews (Honneth, 2009). On the contrary, the uniqueness of my identity is more conducive to understanding both cultures at the same time (Dai, 2020). Sharing experiences with my participants could inspire them to pick themselves up and get out of the situation, although of course everyone's situation and social context is very different, and my experiences may not be applicable to them.

Research findings

Overall, my small-scale research project went as I planned, and I gained much valuable information contributing to social justice. The interview revealed the participants' experiences of

being misunderstood and marginalized, both in China and Australia. Both participants believed that prejudice against the Chinese has been dramatically magnified globally due to the prevalence of nationalism in China, the Chinese government's untimely control of the virus at the early stage and the trade dispute. The participants felt both Chinese and Australians people ignored the unique situation of Chinese students in Australia and the students often faced discrimination. In addition, the Australian government's neglect of international students and the long-term use of distance learning has dramatically damaged Chinese students mental health and social well-being. One participant reported being assaulted for no reason and their physical health affected. It is difficult to know whether the participants exaggerated events or the impact of language difficulties or study stress. In addition, nationalist sentiment has been heightened due to nationalism's dominance, and the conflict between the East and West is severe. Despite being a vulnerable group likely attention is paid politically to Chinese students' health conditions. My research project, whilst small, is important as the function of social work practice is to effectively intervene and allocate resources and solutions to alleviate those who are suffering. Social research can affect relevant policymakers' decisions, so we need to include those experiencing discrimination and alienation like Chinese students by listening to their voices to enact change (Honneth, 2009).

Conclusion

I gained many valuable insights from my attempt to conduct independent social work research. Interestingly, the participants did not report feel depressed when recalling these experiences for the research. Instead, they found my interview supported them as they could tell their sufferings to those who understood them. Social work research is a social justice practice that asks social workers to be reflective, versatile, and skilled in a range of practice areas and able to translate professional values into action. Social workers in contemporary society face a complex, diverse and changing environment regarding human rights and social justice, and social work research pays attention to policies, institutional procedures, and structures that embed inequality. Therefore, social workers are strongly required to be capable of researching to comprehend and coordinate their practice as it is accurate testing for them to judge their training and engagement. Meanwhile, numerous new understandings, policies, projects, etc., are generated during

practitioner research because social workers need to investigate and report more (AASW, 2010).
A larger study is needed to further explore the experiences of Chinese students in Australia.

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