Understanding the experiences and psychological impacts of the 1990's war in the Former Yugoslavia on individuals who fled the conflict and resettled in Australia as refugees

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Abstract

This study highlights personal individual stories and emotional experiences of Former Yugoslavia war survivors through conducting semi-structured interviews with four participants, two male and two female. Each of the participants were asked questions relating to their lives before, during, and after the war. Their responses showed that their lives changed dramatically upon the commencement of conflict and that they mostly ceased to be productive members of society. This could in part be attributed to insufficient access to mental health services which was prevalent throughout the reported experiences.

All four participants were significantly affected by conflict, this suggests studies are warranted to accurately identify what is likely a large percentage of survivors suffering post war psychological issues. The number of individuals requiring assistance to address mental health issues arising from conflict is likely underestimated which may hinder integration efforts.

A surprising finding was that all four participants were grateful for the opportunity to tell their stories rather than being hesitant as initially expected, indicating an openness to recounting trauma which may assist future studies. Overall, the findings for this study also have future implications for the long-term treatment and integration of refugees within other host countries.

Key words

war, social work, refugee, interview, Serbia

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Introduction

As part of my studies in 'Research Skills for Social Change' unit, I have spent the last twelve weeks collating information and conducting a small-scale research plan. I will firstly address the significance of research in social work practice and consider the methodological choice I opted for, including its utilisation for data collection. I will refer to the ethical issues that arose in my research plan and the significance that the research question had to me. I intend to present my findings whilst linking it back to existing literature on the topic. I will refer to the changes I made from my proposed research plan, to my current refined one. Finally, I shall discuss what I learnt about research from my project and how I will use these learning experiences and skills in my future research as a social worker.

The importance of Social Research to Social Work

Social research is important as it teaches us how to evaluate practice and how to incorporate research into practice for more effective results. Research skills are the key to building theory and to ensuring that those approaches and outcomes are effective. Social workers need to keep up to date on research in various fields that relate to their practice, such as certain disorders and new data. "Conducting social research prompts social work practitioners to analyse current polices and determine improvement of services" (D'Cruz & Jones, 2013c p. 10). Research enables social workers to better understand, support and assist their clients. Social workers should question the validity of new information, monitor, and evaluate the application of programs and policies before using research findings in professional practice (Erbay, 2017).

Methodological choice

I chose to use a qualitative research methodology with semi–structured face-to-face interviews that began with an open-ended rapport building question and finished with a question that left participants hopeful and positive for the future. Dempsey (et al., 2016) suggests that face-to-face interviews are best when collecting data on sensitive topics. My reason for doing this was that it enables researchers to think reflexively and allows people to tell their story; this aligns with social work values. It also respects the dignity and autonomy of individuals and is an empowering research method which places the individual as the expert in their lives (Australian Association of Social Workers, 2020).

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Ethical Issues

As per the Australian Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics 2020, I obtained informed, written consent from participants to take part in my research project via 'WhatsApp' and Facebook Messenger phone applications. I minimised the risk for harm, discomfort, and inconvenience to interviewees by sharing the questions prior to the face-to-face interview. This allowed them the opportunity to reflect and revise their answers, also to withdraw from the study if they wished to.

All four participants are refugees from the Former Yugoslavia, two males and two females between 54 -76yrs, all were part of the 1990's Yugoslav war. As my participants were family and friends, there was an existing rapport; a high element of trust and understanding between us. I reassured them of anonymity and that their personal information and data would be kept private and confidential. I reassured them that all recordings and information would be deleted at the end of my research. Due to sharing the same heritage as my participants, I articulated my questions to avoid creating bias or 'pushing' a certain narrative.

Since I knew the participants and was aware of the power relations between us, I had to reflect on whether they would be willing to disclose the truth or if they may feel embarrassed or intimidated. If there was something in our relationship to hinder them and make them feel like they needed to withhold information. According to Dempsey, qualitative researchers must be aware of the power granted to them when participants "trust them to report and disseminate their personal narratives with the wider public" (Dempsey et al., 2016 p. 488)

I aimed to ensure they felt autonomous, safe, secure and respected with the chance to withdraw consent or not answer questions if they felt uncomfortable. Since war is a highly sensitive topic that could trigger undesirable suppressed emotions in some individuals, I created a safe space and was cautious not to re-traumatize my interviewees. If the participants felt distressed, I allowed them time to feel their emotions thoroughly as "Researchers are obliged to uphold beneficence and non-maleficence" (Dempsey et al., 2016 p. 487).

I was careful not to make the interviewees feel like mere objects or sources of data, rather I aimed to add value to their stories and their lives. I showed them compassion, my utmost respect and understanding for the trauma they experienced, in turn they felt that what they had to say was compelling and noteworthy. "The ethical challenge is for researchers to add value

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to the lives of the people they are researching, recognising them as subjects in the process and not simply as sources of data" (Pittaway et al., 2010 p. 231).

At the conclusion of the interviews, I advised all participants about the help available and provided them with contact details for various helplines, e.g., 'Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors' which provides services to assist people from refugee backgrounds who have experienced traumatic events prior to arriving in Australia.

Research question & data collection strategies

My research project is on the following statement: Addressing the experiences and psychological impacts of the 1990's war in the Former Yugoslavia on individuals who fled the conflict and resettled in Australia as refugees.

Each interview took about sixty minutes and was conducted privately, one-on-one in the participants' homes. I aimed to make them feel safe and at ease to express themselves freely in their familiar surroundings, also to facilitate a conversation between us while using a phone voice recorder. I used a Microsoft Word document to transfer verbal data presented to me during interviews and reassured interviewees that the recordings would be deleted once the information was transferred. Since two of the participants only spoke Serbian, which is my second language, I had to ensure that I obtained correct information prior to deleting it. I asked for their consent to allow my mother to listen to the recordings and this was granted. Each of the four participants were asked the same fifteen questions relating to their lives before, during and after the war. Topics included: family, friends, work, survival, safety, participation in the war, personal trauma, separation from loved ones, psychological impacts, and coping strategies.

I reviewed existing literature on my topic as a secondary source of data collection and conducted qualitative methodology as the primary. I looked for similarities in interviewees' answers regarding psychological impacts of the war and grouped them together under themes.

Reflection

Here I will provide a brief insight into possible causes for the breakdown of the Former

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Yugoslavia, share my research findings and identify prevalent common themes. I will also indicate how my initial research plan differed from the result.

Prior to the 1990's war, communist Yugoslavia comprised of six united republics. In the late 1980's the country suffered economically with very high inflation prompting some republics to seek independence. Slovenia and Croatia were the first to break away, followed by Bosnia. This sparked the Bosnian civil war between its three predominant ethnic groups, Bosnian Muslims, Serbs and Croatians which lasted 1992-1995. The Kosovo war was fought in 1998-1999 between Yugoslav forces and the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) triggering The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATOs) bombing of Serbia which lasted seventy-two days. Two of my participants fled the war from Bosnia, the other two from Serbia. Amongst the responses I identified several common themes:

1. All four participants stated that they had a good life prior to the war, reiterating that it was their 'best life.' Three participants had professional careers which were cut short because of the war.

2. Three of the participants expressed that although there had been numerous rumours and news reports that a war was about to erupt, they were in total shock and disbelief when it happened.

3. During the war, basic survival became paramount for all participants. They struggled for food, water, heating, shelter and personal safety.

4. During the war all four suffered loss of income, receiving no aid from their governments. They relied on family and friends for survival, food and financial assistance. One of the participants is still bitter about Serbs being 'painted as monsters' by NATO and Western Media, which resulted in a ban on Red Cross and United Nations' assistance to Serbian people on the ground during the bombing raids on Belgrade.

5. All four reiterated the persistent, relentless feeling of 'not being safe' adding that they were in a constant state of anxiety, fear, vulnerability, helplessness and uncertainty for the future. One participant described the whole experience of war as 'so incredibly eerie, surreal and unnatural to the human state'. As expressed by (Murthy & Lakshminarayana, 2006) "War has a catastrophic effect on the health and wellbeing of nations."

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6. Importance of family and friends during the war stands out for all participants, sticking together and helping one another. All expressed intense concern, not only for personal safety/survival but for that of their close family members. All were distressed by being separated from close family.

7. All four were faced with death or injuries to people they knew, which devastated and traumatised them.

8. Recalling their worst memory, for three participants it was when they were being attacked. One spoke about running into an underground shelter terrified after someone shouted that an atomic bomb had just been dropped, only to be attacked by a bat once inside the filthy, candle-lit basement. This caused them to have regular nightmares for years after. For another interviewee it was the air raid sirens which made them freeze in fear, not knowing where to run as their apartment block had no basement to hide in. To this day they are hypervigilant to loud noises, smoke alarms make them burst into tears. The third participant's worst memory was the day when, as a doctor/surgeon in a makeshift clinic within 10km of the front line, they were attacked by twelve grenades. That same day eight dead and forty-three wounded soldiers were brought in and as there was no more room inside the clinic, the participant had to treat them outside in the knee-deep snow. The tragedy, as the participant puts it, is not only that the participant personally knew ten of those people, but that the numbers of dead and injured were grossly under reported and barely got a mention in the media. To the participant this meant that their lives didn't matter and that they died for nothing. This event left the participant greatly distressed, angry and sad. The mere fact that the participant recalled the exact date that this occurred, the exact numbers of victims including the fictitious numbers reported, thirty years later, suggests to me the enormity of the experience.

9. All four expressed elation at being alive and reiterated their firm stance on never again wanting to be a part of any war. They asserted that war made them stronger and better able to stand up to challenges.

10. Three participants have become very religious post war.

11. According to Bendjo (et al., 2019 p. 373), "Psychological disturbances are prevalent amongst refugees escaping war torn countries." This statement was reiterated in my findings for both male and female participants. Both female participants acknowledge

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that war traumatised them to this day and have sought professional help. While they didn't seek treatment straight away due to language, transport, and financial obstacles, both have since been diagnosed with depression, anxiety and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. They are still receiving treatment and express a positive attitude and hope for the future. Both the males are disillusioned, bitter and angry about the war, how it impacted their lives and the 'injustices' for their friends' deaths. They acknowledge being affected by their friends' deaths but are adamant that they don't need therapy. While insisting that he doesn't need help, one of them said: "Do not participate in the war anywhere, ever, as you are hit with the affects in the aftermath." The other male participant, who suffered nightmares and jumpiness for some time after the war, says that if he told the 'shrink' what he'd been through that he wouldn't believe him and would declare him mad. He talks about having to be careful with people and not trusting anybody. He insists that there will be a similar conflict in the next couple of years in Australia and that the people who decide to stay in the cities deserve it. He also refuses treatment. All these responses correlate with my research question.

12. Three of the participants have never been employed full-time since arriving in Australia, I believe that their trauma has prevented them from leading prosperous and successful lives. All three were professionals back home.

My initial research plan differed from the result; I refined my research question as it was too broad. I changed the number of participants from three to four due to an extra interviewee become available. I'd planned to transfer responses from interviewees onto pen and paper, but decided it was more efficient to voice record.

What I've learnt about research from my project

I've learnt that there is scope for bias, error and misinterpretations which can affect the quality of research and outcomes. I spent a lot of time typing and refining my interviewees' answers so I could successfully look for common themes. A future alternative could be to use dictation software.

I was under the impression that the interviewees, while participating, experienced it as a therapeutic session and were very eager and relieved to share their stories. They didn't want to be thanked for their time, rather they thanked me for listening. By showing interest and

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listening intently to a participant, the researcher enables free flow of conversation (Dempsey et al., 2016). Conducting social research can be challenging but also rewarding as it allowed me to listen to people's stories.

I've learnt that more needs to be done in regard to treating trauma of victims of war, policies around immigration and providing ample mental health facilities is paramount for smoother transitioning into a foreign country. According to D'Cruz & Jones (2013c p. 1), social work research can help evaluate how appropriate and effective certain policies are when addressing problems experienced by particular groups.

While conducting my study I've come to understand how invaluable research is to social work practice. Without reliable study results and data, in any particular area, it would be difficult to assist these individuals; "research can help social workers deliver their practice agenda and in many ways good research and good social work are synonymous" (McLaughlin, 2012 p. 2).

Conclusion

Inevitably what my small-scale research project intended to do was to bring about social change as the available information and relevant literature on my topic is in some cases limited, biased, incorrect or in favour of one particular ethnic group.

The data I found is more targeted on recovery/untreated psychological effects of war rather than using individual stories and emotional experiences of war as a starting point for treatment of these individuals, hence my interest in exploring the topic further. Overall, I am extremely satisfied with my small-scale research project and pleasantly surprised by how readily the participants shared their stories. In reflecting on my experience, it has allowed me to recognise both the strengths and limitation as well as what I would do differently if I were to conduct another research project as an aspiring social worker.

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