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CRITICAL REFLECTION ON MY PHD RESEARCH EXPERIENCE

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ABSTRACT

This article offers a selective account of the author's personal experience with the critical self-reflective inquiry. This article also described the selection of research participants, the researcher's position, trustworthiness, the issue of informed consent, and how confidentiality was maintained throughout the present research study.

1. INTRODUCTION

My research is about emotions and emotional intelligence (EI) in the workplace i.e. social work profession/agencies. The contributions of emotions and EI to working relationships and decision-making processes were explored in the context of Malaysian culture. Due to the traditional view that emotions are irrational and can contribute to ethical problems in professional practice, the positive side of emotions has been ignored in research studies. As human beings, however, social workers are not exempt from encountering emotional experiences, especially when dealing with vulnerable clients. Thus, being competent in emotion management is important. The primary context for my research is social work with children and families in cases of child abuse, neglect, children in need, and child rehabilitation.

My research emphasised a different theoretical understanding of emotions – one that does not assume a stark opposition between rational and irrational, individual and society, or public and private (Savage, 2003). The central epistemological stance in relation to emotions underpinning my study is social constructionism. To unite my understanding of emotions, according to which they are underpinned by biology and can be reliably measured as well as socially constructed, I also adopted the approach of pragmatism due to the concern in application and 'what works' (Patton, 1990) pertaining to emotions. According to pragmatic theory, the truth of a statement (knowledge) is measured by its' function, which means that the statement is true if it has a practical implication in human life (Rosyid, 2010). In the case of my study, emotions and EI were viewed as a result of biological evolution as well as physical and social factors (Rosyid, 2010) as well as life experiences (Zakaria et al., 2011). Meaning to say, pragmatism is concerned with action and change and the interplay between knowledge and action. This makes it

appropriate as a basis for research approaches intervening into the world and not merely observing the world (Goldkuhl, 2012). This means a pragmatist stance aiming for constructive knowledge that is appreciated for being useful in action.

The problems encountered by the basic emotion theory are not philosophical but empirical. They are problems encountered by most analyses of emotion, modern and ancient, and in diverse disciplines. They stem from the preconceptions that underlie not only much of scientific thinking but much of our everyday thinking about emotion as well (Russell, 2009) one of the problems uncovered in studies of the basic emotion theory is culture, in which there are cultural differences in all known aspects of emotions. Based on the consideration that emotions are seen as effects and ideas whose meanings are elaborate and subtle (Lutz and White, 1986) my research employed the ethnographic approach to the research design. However, the present study was not conducted as a full ethnography. The present research draws on and is framed by some ideas that originate from ethnography. In this ethnographic-approached study, a mixture of methods was used for the procedures (questionnaire, interviews, and observation), which allowed me to build the strength of both quantitative and qualitative data in order to provide a more complete picture of the phenomenon under investigation. In this research, the selected social workers (i.e. the child protectors and child rehabilitation officers) were those who were currently dealing with issues relating to 1) children in need of care and protection, and 2) children in need of protection and rehabilitation in hospitals and welfare departments in Sabah, Petaling Jaya, and Kuala Lumpur. A thematic analysis was conducted based on the responses to the questions in the individual interviews (interview guidelines) to summarise the main themes that emerged. Illustrative quotes were used as supporting evidence, using the transcribed individual interviews.

2. CRITICAL REFLECTIONS

2.1. The Researcher's Position

The status of being an insider or an outsider has been explored within the context of qualitative research (Dwyer and Buckle, 2009). According to Nowicka and Ryan (2015) insider researchers share a cultural, linguistic, ethnic, national and religious heritage with their participants and vice versa. Dwyer and Buckle (2009) explain that an insider shares his/her characteristics, roles or/and experiences under study with the participants. Hayfield and Huxley (2015) stress that insider and outsider boundaries may be more blurred than the terms imply and highlight some of the ethical considerations that need to be taken into consideration during qualitative research. In this section, my position as both an insider and an outsider in relation to the subject of this study will be discussed.

I am an academic at Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS), Malaysia, with 18 years of teaching experiences in the area of social work. I do not have any formal social work training or experience as a practitioner. However, I have acquired knowledge about methods, techniques, processes and theories in relation to social work from formal and informal discussions, visits, students' practical training supervisions in social work settings, and reading materials. Some of the social workers in Sabah are my colleagues and former students. In terms of academic background, my first degree was a Bachelor of Science (Human Development) majoring in Social Development, with Social Work as my minor. Due to my interest in social work, during my first-degree study, I chose to conduct a research project in the social work area, entitled 'Public Transportation for Disabled People'. I did my Master's degree at the University of Bradford and graduated with an MA in social work and social care.

Within the context of the present study, I was an insider to some extent, but I was also an outsider, and each of these statuses had both advantages and disadvantages. Based on Nowicka and Ryan's definition of an insider, I have some characteristics similar to those of the present study's participants' social work attributes in terms of culture, language use, ethnicity, nationality and religion (only one participant in the present study, who was Indian, was a Hindu). In relation to gender: like some of the participants, I am female. Being to some extent an insider on the basis of similarities of characteristics had both advantages and disadvantages. One of the advantages was that I already knew some of the participants, who helped me by giving me access to their respective departments and

857

assisting with recruitment. On the other hand, one disadvantage of being an insider was that I was at risk of taking certain things for granted and not fully exploring them. However, as I wanted to explore emotions and EI in the workplace, I attempted to explore them from as objective a point of view as much as possible. As a researcher who has the same culture, language and ethnic identity as most of the participants, I negotiated objectivity before entering the research setting with the same rigour as other researchers, even though I had easy access to the research setting. I tried not to be biased or to over-interpret. Hence, I asked the participants to recheck the transcripts and confirm what I had observed and recorded.

Sabah is the second largest state in Malaysia and is also my home state. Since 1999, I have been tutoring and teaching at UMS, a Malaysian public university located in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah. The length of my working experience has enabled me to establish good contacts and professional relationships with people and agencies who work in Sabah's welfare departments. These professional relationships are normally based on social work development, education, teaching, student placements, conferences, and so forth. Based on these relationships, I have received good responses from staff members in almost all of the welfare departments in Sabah, which helped in completing the research and made the research process easier. Likewise, I have also received good responses from staff members of the welfare departments in Kuala Lumpur. While this research was being conducted, I had no difficulties in building professional relationships with the administrators, social workers (i.e. child protectors and rehabilitation officers), and other workers there, apart from the child social workers. The Faculty of Psychology and Education at UMS also has a good relationship with the welfare departments in Kuala Lumpur. Members of the staff from these two institutions frequently communicate, interact, and meet with one other. In addition to that, Kuala Lumpur's Welfare Department has two female senior officers, who are also child protectors and my personal friends. They were my course mates during university while we were undertaking our bachelors' degrees. These two senior officers have been of huge assistance in matters concerning ethical procedures and research approval. In Petaling Jaya, however, I faced a little bit of difficulty because this setting was new to me. I had never met or had any contact with any of the staff members there. Nevertheless, I managed to establish a good relationship after several meetings and courtesy calls to all the premises in Petaling Jaya, Subang Jaya, and Shah Alam.

The main difference between the participants and I were related to our respective roles: I am an academician who lectures for the social work programme at a Malaysian public university, while the participants are practitioners who have had direct contact with clients. This is reflected in Dwyer and Bucker's definition, according to which, to some extent, in terms of role and experience of social work practice, I was an outsider to the participants. However, this presented as an advantage to me as I investigated the use of emotions and EI in the workers' professional practice in the workplace because I could thoroughly study and question professional practice in a more objective way. On the other hand, I did not have any working experiences as a practitioner and I also had no direct contact with the clients; therefore, there was a risk that I would not be able to accurately interpret how the workers regulated and managed their emotions, or how they utilised their emotions during their social work practice with their clients. My status as both an insider and an outsider in the present study had some implications for the processes of collecting, analysing, and interpreting the data. This can be explained in terms of reflexivity, which is a process that enables the researcher to understand said implications. Furthermore, reflexivity is important because it is perceived as an integral process in qualitative research, in which the researcher continuously reflects on how the actions impact on the research setting and affect data collection and analysis (Lambert *et al.*, 2010).

Mustapha (2000) define reflexivity as

> An elusive often used interchangeably with reflection. It encompasses reflection but also incorporates other features so that it is not just the individualised action of separate practitioners in the manner suggested by reflective practice; rather, it is the collective action of an academic discipline or occupational group.

> (Knott and Scragg, 2007)

In terms of reflexivity, as stated earlier, I could easily enter the research setting by using my position as a university academic who has an interest in emotions and EI, and in knowledge on emotions and gender. Additionally, as an insider in accordance with Nowicka and Ryan's definition of the term, I also have cultural knowledge and experience relating to emotions and gender in Malaysia's pluralistic society, i.e. relating to expressing, managing and utilising emotions. During the interview sessions with the male participants (particularly with those young social workers without any administrative responsibility), they commented that they expressed less emotion than the female participants. The participants have seemingly accepted social rules concerning emotions and gender. This reflects the social constructionist view of gender and emotions. Social constructionists propose that emotions are largely determined by social norms for emotions, or 'feeling rules' (Hochschild, 1979).

The novice workers seemed to be more inclined to stick to organisational procedures as they reported that it was easier to do so, and were suggested not to include emotions in their professional practice. According to them, decisions would be made more quickly by referring directly to the practice and organisational procedures. This was in contrast to the male senior workers and/or those holding senior positions in the organisations, who seemed to use their emotions instead. In the earlier interviews with the young male workers, I realised that I could easily jump to the conclusion that the young male workers were not professional in their practice as my interest in the present study was to explore the part that would involve the display of EI. In my efforts to confirm that the data was objective, I explored the responses in detail by using prompts and probes to get participants to elaborate as much as possible. With regard to the techniques I used, I tried not to influence the responses by all possible means. I also observed the participants' non-verbal behaviours during the interview sessions and then compared the data given by them.

Some of the participants also seemed to indicate that they wanted to know about and understand the concept of emotions and EI. I could relate to this, as they tried to please me and welcome me. As the present research was an explorative study, the participants were not required to have an academic knowledge of emotions and EI. The main aim of this study was to explore the subjective meanings of emotions and EI in a Malaysian context. If I was aware that they were trying to please me by reading up on the topic beforehand, I would have expressed my appreciation of their knowledge. However, I also let the participants know that such knowledge was not necessary, and used questions that would explore how the participants used emotions and EI in their working practice.

Emotions are a potentially sensitive topic for discussion, expression, and/or use in Malaysian culture, due to it being perceived as primarily negative. During the interview processes, there was a tendency to avoid the questions or to pretend that emotions were not involved in professional practice. In this respect, being an insider researcher was an advantage to me as I could explore emotions in more depth, as I was perceived to be similar in some ways to the participants, and therefore, I was able to quickly build good rapport with the participants. This allowed me to thoroughly explore the subjective meanings of EI. I maintained a research agenda to secure a conversation for the participants to express, be accountable to, defend, and validate knowledge claims. I recognised how significant individual and cultural contexts were in giving me the necessary access, rapport and trust.

The social constructionist framework, therefore, has enabled me to remain flexible and open regarding the emotions and EI of the participants. I did not feel intimidated or overwhelmed by the expert 'knowledge' that I seemingly did not have. I brought myself and my experiences into the encounters with the participants by remaining aware of my social and cultural background, as well as any personal 'biases' I might have. In light of social constructionism, the study attempted to gain an understanding of the emotions and EI of the child and family social workers in the workplace.

2.2. Ethical Approval

In qualitative research, researchers face ethical challenges in all stages of the study, from designing to reporting. These include anonymity, confidentiality, informed consent, researchers' potential impact on the

participants, and vice versa (Sanjari *et al.,* 2014). Qualitative research, particularly ethnographic work, is very much a front-line activity and is subject to many variables, most of which are likely to be beyond the control of the researcher (Watts, 2008) adds that the emotions of the researcher and participants are among the variables in this type of research, that may also be difficult to manage, and awareness of the potential for feelings to disrupt even the most carefully made plans should form part of the ethnographic researcher's ethical and practical toolkit. All research with humans need to go through ethical procedures. As the present study concerned emotions and EI in oneself and others, and in view of the fact that emotions are seen as a particularly sensitive aspect for study in a Malaysian local context it is important to emphasise ethical issues and aspects, in addition to the idea that emotions are part of an individual's private feelings. Thus, to involve humans as research participants by inquiring how they perceive emotions and emotional experiences, and observing how they express and regulate emotions, this research could have a high psychological impact on the participants.

In an effort to address these issues, ethical approval had been applied for and obtained from four agencies: The University of Bradford, the Unit of Economic Planning Malaysia (UPEM), the Malaysia Social Welfare Department, and Malaysia's Ministry of Health. Ethical approval was acquired from the University of Bradford – Research Approval from the Unit Ethics Administrator, University of Bradford), UPEM, the Malaysia Social Welfare Department and Malaysia's Ministry of Health.

As the present study involved human participants, there were procedures that needed to be fulfilled before conducting the study. Apart from getting approval from the University of Bradford, I was also required to apply for ethical approval from Malaysia's government to conduct this study. At the University of Bradford, the granting of ethical approval was done by the Committee for Ethics in Research, a committee that falls under the Research and Knowledge Transfer Committee, University of Bradford. The research proposal was submitted twice to the committee, as the first submission did not meet the requirements of the panel. Hence, a three-month revision was conducted to revise the research proposal, involving the application in the University of Bradford. Ethical approval was finally granted after I had addressed the comments and suggestions made by the panel. Most of the panel's comments related to confidentiality.

The Malaysian government also has its' own procedures that need to be followed before ethical approval is given to any Malaysians or non-Malaysians who are studying abroad, who choose Malaysia as a location for data collection. This procedure is conducted by UPEM, which serves as the centre for research ethical application in Malaysia. Because the data of this study was to be brought outside Malaysia, approval from UPEM had to be obtained. Thus, in my case, documents such as the research proposal, the official letter from the University of Bradford that stated my current status as a student, and the document granting ethical approval from the University were submitted to UPEM. UPEM forwarded my application to the Malaysia Social Welfare Department and Malaysia's Ministry of Health; these two organisations/departments were selected because the social workers are based there. The Malaysia Social Welfare Department and the Ministry of Health also have their own committee for ethical research procedures. After getting approval from the Ministry of Health and the Malaysia Social Welfare Department, the approval was passed to UPEM by these two organisations for further action. Three months after submission to UPEM, approval was granted by the Malaysia Social Welfare Department and Malaysia's Ministry of Health through the provision of an official letter from UPEM.

Several ethical issues were raised in the present study. The importance of protecting the participants' anonymity and confidentiality were among the important issues raised. I ensured that during the discussion process, I did not act in a manner that could cause uneasiness or tension to the participants, and tried not to be biased. As I used the qualitative framework and an ethnographic approach by employing observation and interviews as the methods in the present study, my contact and relationships with the participants became close (Moriarty, 2011). The present study involved observing the workers' experienced emotions and behaviours in the awareness that emotion is a taboo subject in Malaysian culture, and thus a sensitive issue for study. Even though the gap and

860

relationship with the participants were closer, my position as an outsider researcher was emphasised to ensure that the participants felt comfortable during the process of data collection, as upholding confidentiality was important.

The differences between the male and female participants in dealing with children's cases could be the best example when discussing emotions, EI, and social work practice in this study. During the interview sessions, I noticed several differences between the male and female participants in how they expressed their emotions verbally, together with non-verbal expressions (facial expressions), i.e. empathy. It seemed that the female participants showed more empathy than the male participants. The male participants, particularly the novice workers, also commented on this matter. The male participants reported that their female colleagues used more expression of emotions in relation to empathy during their professional practice. It is noted that empathy is important in social work practice (Gerdes and Segal, 2011) and it is one of the skills needed in the social work profession (Travithick, 2000) hence, social workers are encouraged to use or express empathy irrespective of gender (Nadelson, 1993).

I was upset that the child and family workers were reluctant to use empathy in their practice, as this could lead to unsafe practice. However, this situation was also noticed by the line managers, as they reported this in the interview sessions. During the interview sessions with one of the line managers, she admitted the difference between her male and female co-workers. According to her, the female workers were more detailed in their written case reports (i.e. recommendations and decisions) than the male workers. As the line manager was aware of this situation, I assumed that the participants' unsafe practice was under control. However, if I witnessed any evidence of unsafe practice and the line managers were not aware of the workers' behaviour, I reported this to the participants' line managers.

I did not oblige the participants to answer the interview questions if they felt that the questions were too personal or they were not comfortable answering them. As some of the participants included my own colleagues and former students, I also informed them that they were not obliged to participate in the study and could subsequently withdraw without giving a reason at any time. In addition, I offered anonymity to the participants in my research project, particularly for the first phase, as this would convince them to "give more open and honest responses" (Collis and Hussey, 2003).

In some situations/cases, some service users (e.g. children, parents and guardians) were also present at the times I carried out the observations of the child social workers' professional activities. In these situations, the workers would introduce me to their clients/service users. However, the child social workers did explain why I was there, and they also asked if the service users were comfortable with my presence. Although consent was given by the service users, it was only done on a verbal basis. Notably, a written consent form was not provided by the researcher for service users since the present study was only focused on emotions and EI among the child social workers. I also tried to show my professionalism and ensure that I did not create any discomfort for the service users. I also talked to the service users in order to build a good rapport with them.

Hence, I took great care not to disclose detailed information about the agencies where I obtained the data (e.g. names and location), and the information was treated anonymously. There are several hospitals and welfare departments in Kuala Lumpur, Selangor, and Sabah. For example, there are about 44 hospitals/medical centres in Kuala Lumpur/Selangor (MSIG., 2014). There are also numerous welfare department agencies in Kuala Lumpur, Selangor, and Sabah. Welfare departments are set up at both state and district levels. Furthermore, without anonymization, there was a potential for garnering controversy regarding the government agencies, welfare agencies, and services that are required to uphold particular values, have responsibility for maintaining individual dignity, and paying respect to colleagues, agencies and professionals. The potential for controversy might create problems for me as the researcher in both the qualitative and quantitative approaches used, whereby precise information such as names and addresses of the participants were not taken and recorded.

Data from questionnaires, individual interviews and observations were kept confidential. In any findings that I would publish, I did not include any information that would make it possible to identify the participants

individually. Research data (recordings, transcripts and questionnaires) were kept in a locked filing cabinet, and only my supervisors and I had access to the records. The transcripts were stored in a computer protected with a password and anonymised. References were made of anonymising the participating departments and workplaces in dissemination of findings and of individual participants. Only I knew the names of the workplaces and the participants. I kept the detailed information about the participants and the workplaces confidential. I was committed not to share the specific contents with anyone except for my supervisors. I also committed myself to not share any information that would allow another researcher or an outsider to know who participated in my research. However, in the case of individual interviews (i.e. interviewees working in the same department/agency), since the interviewees already knew each other, their anonymous participation was not possible. Hence, when this condition of confidentiality could not be met, I explained this to the individuals. In terms of field notes, the agencies' names and the participants' details were also kept confidential and were anonymised instead. All related written documents and digital recordings were kept in the locked cabinet.

Individual interview sessions were recorded using a digital voice recorder. The voice recording was transcribed to ensure accurate reporting of the information provided by participants. The participants and I, the researcher, had signed a form stating that we would not discuss any item on the recording with anyone other than the participants/the researcher. No one's name was to be asked for or disclosed during the interview sessions. The digital voice recorders were stored in a locked filing cabinet before and after the transcriptions had been made. The recordings of discussions in the interview will be destroyed 10 years after the completion of this research.

Furthermore, participants were given the option of either agreeing or refusing to participate in the research. The participants also had the right to withdraw from the present study at any point without being required to give me any explanation. In the present study, one participant, who was also one of the interviewees, refused to have his actions and daily activities in the workplace observed. I showed my respect by giving him his unconditional right to withdraw.

Although I assured confidentiality, the participants were aware that if I witnessed any unsafe practice I would report their behaviour to their superiors (e.g. line managers). For the sake of the clients, the social workers were required to avoid all forms of unsafe practice. 'Unsafe practice' is generally defined as any practice that poses an actual or potential threat to the client, including physical, psychosocial, or cultural safety. Unsafe practice includes infliction of harm not only on the client but also on colleagues or oneself. In the present study, I noted one example of a potentially unsafe practice, whereby a worker seemed to disbelieve her client's rape allegation. The quote is as follows:

> *My client, a child aged 12 years, claimed that she was a victim of sexual abuse. She claimed that her stepfather raped her. I … I am not saying that I don't believe her [her client], but after I met her mother and the stepfather, I knew she was lying. During the session, I didn't show my anger. It is resentment. Yes! It is [resentment]. But because her session was not over yet, I couldn't show my feelings, otherwise, my session would have taken longer.*

(Probation Officer 7, female, aged 30)

Not believing in clients' accounts could be unsafe and may breach the ethics of practice, i.e. professional boundaries: "Professional boundaries are a set of guidelines, expectations and rules which set the ethical and technical standards in the social care environment. They set limits for safe, acceptable and effective behaviour by workers" (Cooper, 2012). If workers do not believe in their clients, they do not help them in the way they should and they instead handle cases without care, which means denying the clients' rights to protection and support. From my personal view and understanding of the context (developed through observations), Probation Officer 7 only expressed her feelings towards the client's attitude, in which her behaviour seemed to suggest an accusation towards the child. However, the worker followed the required procedures in practice, completing the client's sessions, which resulted in the 12-year-old child staying with her mother and stepfather. I was able to judge from

this scenario that the social worker made a sound professional judgment. If the worker had not followed the required procedures to protect the child, then I would have reported her conduct to her line manager as an unsafe practice.

2.3. Trustworthiness

There are many types of qualitative validation terms in use other than trustworthiness, for example, verification and authenticity (Creswell, 2013). Attempts were made to ensure the trustworthiness of the present study according to the criteria proposed by Guba and Lincoln (1981) credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Ensuring credibility (in preference to internal validity) is one of the most important factors in establishing trustworthiness (Guba and Lincoln, 1989). According to Guba and Lincoln (1989) credibility is defined as being parallel to internal validity. It focuses on establishing a match between the constructed realities of the participants and those realities as represented by the researchers. To promote confidence that I had accurately recorded the phenomena under scrutiny, the development of an early familiarity with the culture of participating organisations before the first data collection was carried out with great care and in great detail (Shenton, 2004). Before I started my research, I visited some welfare departments and hospitals in Kuala Lumpur and Kota Kinabalu, where I could find potential participants. I also made courtesy calls to introduce myself as the researcher and to get to know the potential participants and their organisational cultures, such as their norms, procedures, and policies. From the visits, I gained an adequate understanding of the organisations and managed to establish a relationship of trust between the organisations, the potential participants, and myself. In addition to that, the present study used questionnaires, individual interviews, and observations. The use of different methods also enabled me to triangulate the collected data. The findings from the observations, for instance, confirmed data that I collected from the individual interviews. Member checks were also used to bolster the present study's credibility. I asked the participants to read the transcripts of interviews in which they had participated in. There were also some observations for which I would ask the participants to give their reasons for the particular patterns observed. For example, I would directly ask the participants after they finished their formal activities with clients and/or conversations with their colleagues at work.

Transferability is considered to be parallel to external validity or generalisability in quantitative research (Guba and Lincoln, 1989). If the researcher means to make generalisations about the subject of the research, as is common in disability ethnography, then strategies to enhance transferability are important (Krefting, 1991). The present study was about the perception of child and family social workers in Malaysia concerning the contributions of emotions and EI to their working relationships and decision-making processes. Krefting (1991) notes that a key factor in the transferability of the data is the representativeness of the informants for the particular group. According to Krefting, one strategy used to address transferability in sample selection is the use of formal judges to help in the selection of informants' representative of the phenomenon under study. The selected informants are assumed to be capable of giving a pure answer to the phenomenon under study (e.g. their experience and perceptions). In the present study, I was advised by the director of a child division to select potential child social workers in certain districts in Peninsular Malaysia since, according to the director, many cases of child abuse, child neglect, and child rehabilitation are reported in those districts. This issue might contribute to an emotional disturbance among the child social workers. Meanwhile, regarding the medical social workers, only workers in Kota Kinabalu were selected as the participants in this qualitative research.

Thus, I selected three districts in Malaysia: Kota Kinabalu, Kuala Lumpur and Petaling Jaya. However, this might raise some ethical issues relating to the district names being mentioned (i.e. Kota Kinabalu, Kuala Lumpur and Petaling Jaya). However, as I mentioned above, there is more than one hospital and welfare department in each district. Therefore, identifying which agencies were involved could be difficult. Additionally, I also obtained official permission to conduct this research. There is a procedure implemented by the Ministry of Health and the Ministry

of Women, Family and Community Development in Malaysia: before conducting any research, the researchers' should apply for ethical approval for it. I followed this procedure in order to get ethical approval from both ministries. Moreover, to avoid this kind of ethical issue, I only asked questions related to my research aims.

Dependability addresses the issue of reliability (Shenton, 2004). In quantitative research, dependability refers to the stability or consistency of the inquiry processes used over time, which means dependability is concerned with the question of whether the findings are liable to apply at other times. In order to address the dependability issue more directly, the processes within the study should be reported in detail, thereby enabling future researchers to repeat the work (Shenton, 2004). However, the present study used an ethnographic approach in which the problem with reliability is caused by the fact that ethnographic research occurs in a natural setting and focuses on processes (Burns, 1994) suggests that this problem might be addressed by describing the methodology as comprehensively as possible so that the next researcher can reconstruct the original analysis strategies, which I attempt to do in this chapter.

The potential participants were approached through the heads of selected departments (i.e. child and family departments/units/divisions). I explained the objectives of my study clearly and the criteria for the participants/informants that I needed (e.g. child protectors and/or probation officers, balanced in gender, type and number of cases handled each day, area/location of practice, i.e. urban area, working experience, i.e. from newly appointed to experienced workers, subordinates and leaders, etc.). These criteria applied to both interview and observation processes.

The present study chose social work with child and family practice, with emphasis on the children category. I chose child and family practice because I believe children must be provided with the correct services in light of the fact that children are often not capable of protecting themselves or fighting for their rights. Apart from that, they are valuable assets to Malaysia's future development. The Malaysia Social Welfare Department has emphasised seven social groups that need to be served by this department: children, people with disabilities, the elderly, families, women, the poor, and those afflicted by ordeals. Among these categories, children from the crucial one, involving those who need care and protection, those who need protection and rehabilitation, those who are beyond control, those who become victims of trafficking and abduction, adoption cases, children with criminal records, and child care. As there is an issue pertaining to the limitations of professional social workers recruited as social workers in the Malaysian context, generally, their competency and ability to deliver services may be in doubt. This may contribute to stress and ethical issues among social workers. Thus, being competent emotionally (i.e. utilising emotions and regulating emotions) is considered important in handling child and family issues. Furthermore, child protectors from potential areas (districts) were chosen to participate in this research. The chosen districts were among the locations where issues and problems involving children were prevalent. The participants also consisted of experienced workers, both male and female, including administrators and subordinates. Meanwhile, the participants in hospitals were comprised of workers who handled paediatric cases. The interview process was guided by semi-structured questions. The participants were asked the same questions, which enhanced dependability.

Confirmability in qualitative research is what objectivity is to quantitative research (Sinkovics et al., 2008). In qualitative research, Shenton (2004) notes that triangulation can be used to ensure that the research findings are the results of the experiences and ideas of the informants, which can reduce the effects of researcher's bias. The present study used observations and individual interviews. The use of a series of observations helped to explain the attitudes and behaviours of the child social workers under scrutiny. The observations were used to enhance what was learned from the interviews, as they shed more light on the behaviour of the people in question.

2.4. The Contribution of Study

This study is one of very few studies which have investigated and tried to understand emotions within interpersonal relationships by examining the everyday social settings in which they occur. Malaysia is an Eastern country that was chosen as the research location. As Malaysia's cultures differ from those in the Western regions, together with the fact that some traditional cultures are still practised in the country, social factors were prioritised in this research in understanding emotions. The study is intended to draw attention to how emotions and EI are always produced in social work practice and/or particular contexts that give them their meaning and shape the ways in which they unfold.

The present study found that religiosity/spirituality facilitated EI among the Malaysian child social workers. Praying and other religious practices were reported as having the capacity as helping one to regulate one's emotions in the workplace. The social workers revealed that spirituality through religious beliefs and practices, almsgiving, caring for people, and expression of gratitude to Allah could moderate their feelings and guide them towards positive emotions. The research findings seemed to reveal that Asian countries such as Malaysia still emphasise the importance of religious influence in society's daily routine, either in formal or informal tasks, which shapes behaviour and actions. Furthermore, emotions were perceived by the participants as a negative element that needed to be avoided in the workplace. This might relate to the traditional assumption and view that emotions are disruptive and irrational. However, these emotions were also perceived to contribute to the workplace, particularly among the experienced workers. To consider the positivity of emotions and how to change others' views concerning emotions, EI might be concerned with skills in empathising, expressing and regulating one's own and others' emotions in the workplace.

Under the theme of perception of emotions as a negative and disruptive element in decision-making processes, it seems that the Malaysian child social workers' understanding, knowledge, and terms concerning emotions and their contributions to decision-making processes were limited to the negative effects of emotions. This may stem from how Malaysian people devalue emotions due to cultural restrictions on expressing negative emotions. However, they also revealed some positive effects of emotions. According to them, they would use emotions in decision-making processes and in relevant situations and purposes, in order to achieve rational decision-making. In this circumstance, the use of emotions serves as a motivator that could help them understand and facilitate others. Apart from the positive effects of emotions, they also perceived that emotions could have negative effects. According to them, emotional over-involvement and the influence of mixed emotions on rational thinking could disrupt decision-making processes.

The findings of the present study reflect the significance of cultural norms in Malaysia. As Malaysia is an Asian country, its plurality of cultures has traditionally been characterized as collectivistic. This suggests that Malaysian people are interdependent, in that they tend to focus on their connection to social groups and are concerned to maintain social group harmony in their relationships with others. Thus, hierarchy, social positions, individualistic roles and relationships are less central to Malaysian communities, in which group goals are more emphasised than individual ones. The sense of agency among Malaysian people is also socially defined (Mahmud *et al.*, 2011). For example, a child is socialised early and required to focus on social connections within his/her family and community by following adults' instructions. Furthermore, a child is taught to obey his/her teachers and to cooperate with, instead of challenging, his/her teachers and peers at school. Respect and social harmony are emphasised among Malaysian communities; thus, there is deference to authority. Therefore, understanding others, particularly other people's emotions, appears to be important in building good relationships. This has been emphasised in Malaysian culture in an effort to ensure and maintain harmony in groups and/or society.

3. SUMMARY

This paper discussed the critical reflection of my Ph.D. research experience. The discussions included my position as a researcher, ethical approval, and trustworthiness. The present study used pragmatism as an approach due to the assumption that emotions and EI are underpinned by biology and can be reliably measured as well as socially constructed. This paper further described the issue of informed consent and how confidentiality was maintained throughout my study.

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