Learning from the research process: discussing sensitive topics as a cultural outsider

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Abstract

This paper explores the sensitivities and cultural complexities of engaging in research about substance use with a Sikh Punjabi community in England, from the perspective of cultural outsiders. The objective of the research was to explore the feasibility of developing a Community Alcohol Support Package (CASP) within the community, where existing alcohol service provision was felt to be limited, using ethnographic research methods. Tensions between a strict religious prohibition against drinking and a cultural acceptance of a heavy drinking culture created the conditions for the research and its particular challenges. This paper reports on the *process* of conducting the research and the transferable lessons for social work teaching and practice. Two key methodological challenges ~~and their solutions~~ are highlighted together with reflections on how they were addressed: first, the problem of engagement and negotiating access to the community in focus; second, the challenge for outsiders of tuning into the socio-political context of the community and the power dynamics within it. ~~The solution to these~~Overcoming these challenges required high levels of sensitivity to the concerns of the community, while maintaining research integrity, and demonstrable openness and honesty in the course of developing research relationships. The lessons for social work education and practice are discussed.

Keywords: Punjabi, Sikh, alcohol, cultural competence, engagement, service provision

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Introduction

The realities of engaging with sensitive subjects in a culture and community quite different from one's own requires mindfulness, reflexivity, and an understanding of the defensiveness an 'outsider' may face. The ethnically diverse population in England is recognised to some degree within social work education in terms of teaching about social inclusion and exclusion. However, while broad issues are covered, there is a lack of consideration of ethnicity in relation to specific issues that arise in English social work practice. Two topics that are minimally covered in English social work education (if at all) are religion and substance use (*Author's own* et al. 2013; Furness and Gilligan, 2010; Holloway and Moss, 2010). This paper draws on new research exploring alcohol use with a Punjabi Sikh community in Birmingham, a large city in England, to illustrate the sensitivities and cultural complexity of engaging with this type of subject matter as an outsider or group of outsiders to the community – a position that many social workers find themselves in on a regular basis. Its focus is not on the findings of the research, rather the process of conducting the research and how this process raises important transferable lessons for social work practice and education in relation to engaging with the community. Moreover, it explores how a process of reflexive dialogue (Bohm, 1994) enabled insights to be elicited about ourselves and others through cross cultural interaction, learning from each other as a mutual resource and allowing for assumptions, expectations and feelings to be expressed. This paper will begin by

providing the context for the research before progressing to the key lessons learned from its conduct and the implications for social work education and practice.

<u>Sikhism and a Punjabi drinking culture</u>

People of Indian Origin (PIO) comprise the largest minority ethnic group in Britain (Chanda and Ghosh, 2012) with this number increasing significantly in the last 10 years. The 2001 UK Census data estimated there were 1.05 million PIOs in the UK. By 2011 this number had grown to 1.4 million comprising 2.5% of the population of England and Wales (Office for National Statistics 2012). Within this group of PIOs is a group of people originally from the Punjab area of North West India[1], many of whom follow the Sikh religion. Census data show 3% of the population in Birmingham identified as Sikh compared to 0.8% in England on average (Birmingham City Council (BCC) undated). Ninety two per cent of these Sikhs are recorded as of Indian origin with over half the Sikh population born in the UK (BCC 2003). Other countries outside the UK also have high proportions of Punjabi immigrants including Canada, the United States of America, Malaysia, East Africa, Australia and Thailand (Oxford Sikhs, undated).

While religion and culture are important contributors to both individual and group identity, they are not always easy bedfellows. An initial exploration of the limited literature found clear tensions between Punjabi cultural norms around alcohol

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1 Not all Punjabi's are of Indian origin. The Punjab area of 'British India' was split between India and Pakistan in the aftermath of British rule in 1947. While some sources claim that Punjabi Sikhs favoured a move to the Hindu State of India in preference to Muslim Pakistan, some Punjabis will be of Pakistani origin.

consumption and the teachings and principles of Sikhism. To be a good Sikh requires abstention from alcohol, with the Khalsa code of conduct (Sikh Reht Maryada) forbidding the use of alcohol, tobacco and other drugs. The Guru Granth Sahib (GGS) (the central Sikh scripture) reinforces this preference for abstention:

> One has a full bottle, and another fills the cup.
>
> By drinking [liquor], intelligence departs and madness enters the mind.
>
> One cannot distinguish between oneself and others, and endures suffering.
>
> By drinking, one forgets the Beloved, and is punished in the heavenly court.
>
> If it is within your power, do not consume the false intoxicant.
>
> Nanak: The one who meets the True Guru, attains the Eternal intoxicant.
>
> (Guru Amar Das, GGS, 554)

In addition, there are some references to alcohol in the Adi Granth (AG) (the first rendition of Sikh scripture), for example,Guru Nanak told his disciples that those who deal in the 'nectar of truth' had no need for alcohol, and that compared with God's Amrit, 'worldly wines' were tasteless (AG 360). In sum, drinking alcohol or other intoxicating substances are not approved in Sikhism.

In contrast sits the drinking culture of the Punjabi male. Drinking, and heavy drinking in particular, is an accepted part of male Punjabi culture. Drinking alcohol is also tied to issues of status and class and is demonstrated through the provision of quantities and quality of alcohol both at home, as drinking hosts, and in external social

situations such as weddings (Forshaw 2010, McKeighe and Karmi 1993, Oliffe et al. 2012). Commentators have also suggested it is strongly tied to perceptions of masculinity and rituals of male bonding (Oliffe et al. 2012, Sandhu 2009, Singh Gill 2005). In a study of senior Sikh men in Canada, Oliffe et al. (2010) found clear connections between masculine ideals and alcohol use although the men steadfastly denied drinking alcohol in public, while divulging various levels of consumption in private. The men also tended to uncouple drinking from Sikhi (the practice of the Sikh religion) but saw alcohol as providing the social glue for male bonding as part of the 'drinking culture' at work.

The masculine nature of Punjabi Sikh drinking highlights large gender differences in drinking norms within the Punjabi Sikh community. Women's drinking is not approved of and is seen as shameful and highly stigmatised (Agic et al. 2011). A woman's consumption of alcohol, particularly in public, is seen to attract a negative reputation, not just for the woman but also her wider family (Bradby 2007). This is particularly so for younger women as older Punjabi women or 'aunties' are perceived as never drinking alcohol.

However, heavy alcohol consumption clearly has health implications and the heavy drinking of Punjabi Sikh men is increasingly coming to light within acute health settings. There is emerging evidence of health problems within the Punjabi Sikh community including oral cancer, high rates of liver cirrhosis, and alcohol-related mortality (Bayley and Hurcombe 2010, Bhala et al. 2009, Vora et al. 2000). These health risks remain a real challenge for the community, particularly as younger generations of men adopt traditional drinking practices and as younger Sikh women

growing up in Western drinking culture begin to drink more (Bradby and Williams 2006, Forshaw 2010, Hurcombe et al. 2010). The need to grasp the nettle of problematic alcohol use within the Sikh community has been publicly acknowledged by a number of commentators from within the community. Singh and Tatla (2006:177) stated:

> A particularly distinctive feature of British Sikh society today is the high rate of alcoholism among males. Consumption of alcohol has always been very high among Sikhs, with the per capita rate among Sikhs of the Punjab among the highest in the world, but recent studies have shown a growing epidemic…. [although] Alcohol problems are rarely discussed.

On a positive note, religious affiliation has been identified as a protective factor in relation to problematic substance consumption, be it alcohol or other drugs. Some studies suggest that people who report higher religiosity are less likely to engage in alcohol and drug use (Delaney et al., 2009, Geppert et al., 2007, Hodge et al., 2007, Koenig et al., 2001). Studies relating to Sikhism in particular found that people who were striving to overcome alcohol problems were re-engaging with Sikhism to support them with their recovery through increased religious involvement, for example, performing Sewa (service) within the community and the recitation of sacred texts (Morgaria and Orford, 2002, Morjaria-Keval, 2006, Sandhu, 2009, Thandi, 2011).

However, Karlsen and Nazroo (2010) offer an alternative view, stating that the assumption that religion as a protective factor is not evidence based,as other factors, for example, gender and socio-economic status, need to be considered.However,the buffering effect of Sikhism on alcohol consumption remains unclear.

The tension between religion and culture is therefore an obvious one. On the one hand Sikhism disapproves of alcohol use, on the other the Punjabi culture, for males at least, supports traditions of heavy drinking. This was the context in which this research attempted to explore the views and experiences of a particular Punjabi Sikh community in relation to their alcohol support needs. The following section briefly summarises the aims and methods of the research before identifying two key lessons the *process* of the research raised.

Methodological Overview

The objective of the research was to explore the feasibility of developing a Community Alcohol Support Package (CASP) within an identified Punjabi Sikh community. The research took place over a 12 month period from April 2012-March 2013 and the research team comprised three core members, one white British male, one British Pakistani female and one white British female (all part time). In addition, three people (two female, one male) of Punjabi Sikh origin joined the research team for additional research support at specific times. All were new volunteers with Aquarius and one had also been a service user.

This exploratory research adopted two broad methods; first, a literature review sought to identify evidence of existing effective alcohol interventions with this

community and also to identify the range and scope of current community alcohol provision. Second, ethnographic research methods sought to:

1. Establish the views of service providers, commissioners and other relevant agencies about the alcohol support needs within the local community.
2. Establish the views of residents of the community about their support needs in relation to alcohol services, including young people.
3. Identify the 'environmental' opportunities and challenges within the community for developing a CASP.
4. Map the alcohol support services available in the selected community.

In sum, the research sought to marry the views of the community about its alcohol-related needs with what the research evidence says 'works' in relation to community based interventions. This would, in theory, provide a good grounding for the development of future services by the research funder both in terms of the type of services requested but also the process of developing those services for and with the community.

The ethnographic research methods included observation, focus groups and interviews. In particular the ethnographic fieldwork involved sustained engagement with the community to obtain detail and insight into participants' lives through immersion and overt observation (Willis and Trondman 2000).

The research comprised a community audit of the research location which involved walking the entirety of the Ward street by street, recording agencies and services,

where people congregated, the relative wealth of the area, and talking to people where appropriate. It also involved spending time in the Langar [food] hall of Gurdwaras [Sikh places of worship] and talking to people about the research, once the relevant permissions had been obtained. ~~This method of observation and mapping of community services and environment is a tool for both research and practice as a way of identifying community needs and assets. It also allowed the research team to begin to identify possible environmental opportunities and challenges for establishing the CASP as well as the range and scope of existing alcohol provision, local support services and any gaps in services or support.~~

The mapping exercise included mapping the religious and community organisations and visiting places of worship, for example, the Sikh Gurdwaras, to garner information about their management committee members for future contact. ~~The Gurdwaras were the anchor point for establishing contact with research informants on a number of occasions although each place of worship had its own particular style and characteristics, making them more or less amenable to the focus of the research.~~ The overt observation continued throughout the study as did notes of the research process which were included as part of the final data. This ability to reflect on the process provided a valuable insight into successes, barriers and lessons to be learned and was as important to document as the research findings and outcomes.

Talking to key individuals including leaders of local Gurdwaras or community centres, neighbourhood police officers, and local service providers and commissioners enabled insight into a range of perspectives including positive community support, perceived gaps in services and also community tensions, crime and drug misuse.

They also facilitated introductions to, or recommendations about, potential research participants. ~~One example included spending several hours with a local Sikh police officer who introduced the researcher to the locations of street drinkers, the demographic profile of local public house clientele and also facilitated introductions to potential research participants. Being introduced by this well known officer lent some local legitimacy to the research.~~

The engagement with the community took far longer than anticipated. While the anonymous survey had a far quicker response, overall the initial engagement process took longer. Three months had been allowed for the initial engagement but it took at least six months to engage most of the community participants and we had to negotiate different ways to gain access, for example, different agencies had requirements in relation to the gender of the researcher, their seniority within the research team, or the language spoken.

The interviews and focus groups sought to establish the views of service providers, key informants, commissioners and residents of the community in relation to alcohol support needs locally. A range of data collection tools were used including an anonymous survey tool, semi-structured interview schedules and vignette-based discussion. ~~Eight i~~Interviews were conducted with eight service users and 19 ~~nineteen~~ service providers. Three school-based focus groups were undertaken with a total of 22 young people (~~twelve~~ 12 female and ~~ten~~10 male) aged 10- 14 years. A focus group comprising of 14~~fourteen~~ Punjabi speaking, middle-aged to older women was held in an existing community service that provided women only groups. The anonymous survey gained 89 respondents comprising ~~of~~ 81 % self-identifying as Sikh.

Ethical considerations and approval

Ethical approval was obtained through the [authors' institution], firstly at departmental level and subsequently at University level. Forms detailing potential risks of research participation and how they were addressed in the research design were submitted. Informed consent was sought from all research participants and the parents of the young people who participated. ~~Ethical consideration was g~~Given ~~to~~ the sensitive nature of the research subject ~~, especially in view of~~ and the stigma associated with problematic alcohol ~~mis~~use, ~~and how~~ research recruitment approaches needed to be carefully ~~this could be counteracted~~considered ~~in the way the research is undertaken, and concerns were raised about how research participants would be recruited.~~ in terms of how contact was made with participants so that participants could share their views safely and without fear of retribution. **This involved a suggestion from the Project Advisory group about the use of an anonymous survey as a positive step to counteract people's fears of disclosing sensitive information through a mechanism that allows information to be gathered but one step removed. This required further consultation with the University ethics committee.**

This paper will now turn to the lessons learned from the process of this research and their implications for practice.

Methodological Challenges and ~~Solutions~~ Reflections

Two main challenges will be outlined below; first, the challenge of engagement and negotiating access to the community on such a sensitive topic from outside the community; second, the challenge of tuning into the socio-political context of the community and the power dynamics inherent in it.

1.Engagement: the challenge

The primary challenge was how to engage this Punjabi Sikh community about the particularly sensitive topic of alcohol use with its associated shame and stigma and because of the strong religious prohibition against alcohol noted above. In research and practice there is often a concern about how difficult it may be to build respectful and trusting relationships when the subject of the conversation is so sensitive. Nevertheless, it is important "to develop skills and confidence in asking relevant and potentially probing and difficult questions about a range of matters…" (Furness and Gilligan, 2014: 776). Further, tThe research team were mostly cultural outsiders to the community and needed to find a way to engender trust and negotiate relationships for the success of the research. Their previous professional and personal experiences had sensitised them to their relative ignorance of this particular religion and culture and the need to be mindful and reflective of this in their approach to the research. Further, aAn inability of two of the main researchers to speak Punjabi made language a significant barrier to communication. Establishing a rapport is the necessary first step in any research and it is the same for social work practice with the idea of moving from being a stranger to a 'helping professional' or a 'critical friend'. The outsider position can have advantages: "sometimes natives studying their own traditions bring agendas that are different from those of the outsiders" (Neitz, 2013: 134). However, attempts to understand the complexities of alcohol use

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and abuse with the ~~Sikh~~ Punjabi Sikh community could be construed as seeking to label the community, with some research participants in this study expressing fears of talking to an outsider or refusing to participate.

Investigating sensitive topics highlights a number of concerns surrounding the extent to which research may encroach upon people's lives, whether the research is regarded as permissible in society in general, or to the community of inquiry in particular, as well as issues of ethics, politics and legality. ~~Where the research is perceived as threatening, social relations can be edged with mistrust, concealment, and dissimulation.~~ The values and beliefs of an individual or specific group could feel under threat from the nature of the research, with people worried about the data being used to shame or dishonour them. The research could highlight behaviour, such as problematic drinking, that may be tacitly accepted so long as it remains concealed. As Lee comments, "bringing to light what was formerly hidden can be unwelcome"(Lee, 1993: 7) and be perceived as intrusive and threatening. In contrast, there needs to be an acknowledgment that those in marginal groups can exercise power over outsiders through 'closing ranks'. On the other hand, the disclosure and ~~i~~ndentification of the issue may be perceived as empowering by certain members of the community for actually beginning to address a growing concern, and creating possibilities for action. In this research t~~T~~here ~~i~~was a ~~~~sense that members of the community kn~~o~~ew ~~it~~heavy and problematic drinking ~~i~~was an issue but ~~they are~~were unsure or uncertain how to respond~~, how to garner support, and develop strategies to address alcohol misuse and its associated problems. They may actually welcome the prospect of support.~~ .

~~There is always a concern about how difficult it may be to build respectful and trusting relationships when the subject of the conversation is so sensitive.Nevertheless, it is important for researchers and practitioners " to develop skills and confidence in asking relevant and potentially probing and difficult questions about a range of matters.." (Furness and Gilligan, 2014: 776) like the nature of alcohol misuse within the context of religious prohibition.~~

Getting behind individual and collective resistance, defence mechanisms, and impression management (Goffman 1959, Hollway and Jefferson 2000), to actually talk genuinely about alcohol problems and related problems was the crux of the research project. As Moscovici and Paicheler (1978) and others contend (see Hogg 2010), minority groups need to assert their distinctiveness and to present a positive image, and therefore downplay or override any problematic issues.

Engagement: ~~The Solution~~Reflections on the way forward

The research team established a Project Advisory Group (PAG) at the start of the research, comprising 10 people from within the community ~~and others with a~~ including those with a personal or professional interest in the outcomes and outputs of the research, for example, a commissioner, service users and a local psychiatrist. The PAG acted as a critical friend in supporting and guiding the research in its early stages, reading draft outputs, as well as providing a sounding board for the research team's questions. The PAG provided an insider perspective with expertise in both alcohol services and Punjabi Sikh culture. The first PAG was held at the start of the project specifically for the purposes of seeking guidance on, and contacts for, engagement. A clear message from the group was that asking about alcohol use and problems directly was unlikely to work but that using language that related it to

health or family issues was more likely to facilitate discussion. It was therefore agreed to discuss alcohol use in a wider 'health and well being' framework and subsequent project information and contact with all participants used the health and wellbeing terminology. ~~Further, questions in the interview or focus group schedules or in the survey asked about health and family issues.~~. This softer approach to discussing alcohol use and related support needs enabled the research team to access a number of events, for example a national 'Mental Health and Wellbeing' Conference at which many survey respondents were recruited. ~~It also opened some doors while others remained tightly shut.~~

Overcoming the language barrier also quickly became an important feature in building trust and rapport. The ~~lead researcher~~ non-Punjabi speaking members of the research team quickly learned key concepts and terms used within Sikhism and ~~learned~~ several words of Punjabi. This had the effect of immediately demonstrating ~~his~~ their willingness to learn and set ~~him~~ them aside from other outsiders. As one participant ~~stated~~ told one of the team when asked about alcohol service needs:

> ...people know Aquarius is doing this research and it's specialised for the Sikh community; people are going to say they care. They will learn a lot more than maybe another organisation out there... . For instance you have used Punjabi words and I have never had anyone mention 'Giani' to me and you have mentioned key things like 'sewa' and that builds up a bit of rapport. If you build up that rapport, you build up the trust. I could say come and speak to Gary [the researcher] because he at least has an understanding.

The research team also became reliant upon the research assistance of an Aquarius practitioner who could speak Punjabi fluently and who interpreted conversations during the research. This made a lot of difference to the reception the researchers received, particularly at first meetings with some service providers and key individuals. ~~It also made the difference as to whether someone was prepared to discuss their views and perceptions about alcohol when an initial approach in English resulted in polite denial.~~

Tenacity and patience were also important to engagement. People often did not show up for appointments or they were cancelled. Emails and telephone calls to prospective participants often went unanswered and there needed to be an acceptance that perseverance, in good spirit rather than in frustration, was required. In people's busy lives we were not likely to be a priority and, with the additional tensions around the subject matter, engagement was going to take time. Repeat calls, emails, messages and visits at various times of the day and evening eventually paid off as was a willingness to listen openly to people's concerns about the research, their disappointment at previous attempts at working with services, and their mistrust that this would lead to predominantly white services 'parachuting in' to the community. Continually being honest and upfront about the nature of the research and incessantly seeking permission at every stage to conduct the research opened doors. ~~Some interviews took several meeting attempts before they actually happened. This is not unusual in undertaking fieldwork, but it takes tenacity to remain optimistic and consider when it is best to let go of the contact and lose the interview in spite of having made a lot of effort to engage. In this study people were~~

always polite and it was difficult to assess whether they were trying gently to put off the researcher or say no completely.

In sum, overcoming the challenge of engagement involved listening to advice from within the community as well as developing an intuitive, reflexive and sensitive approach to conducting the research. It also involved being willing to learn and adopting a genuine curiosity about the other's frame of reference, while at the same time posing questions and seeking to clarify meanings in a collaborative and negotiated process. There was a clear need for epistemological humility "in acknowledging the partiality of one's own knowledge" (Clark 2006: n.p), especially given the Punjabi Sikh community's experiences of western hegemonic discourse.

2. Power and politics: the challenge

Tuning into the socio-political context requires an understanding of the flow of power within and between individuals, groups, organisations and institutions, and forms part of the ethnographic paradigm. As with social work practice, researchers need to be aware of the power inherent within their role, along with the role of others. LeCompte and Schensul (1999) point out that it is not always clear how privileged or superior the researcher's status is perceived to be by participants of a study, nor how this perception can impact upon it. Within social work practice the power can be much clearer, particularly when conducting statutory investigations.

Within this research it quickly became clear that hierarchy, power and politics within the community featured heavily on a number of levels, particularly given the

importance of status to some members of the Punjabi Sikh community. This presented a number of challenges:

1. Quickly recognising the importance of status in the community and its implications for negotiating access.

2. Determining who the senior or influential members of the community were, their gatekeeping role, and whether their involvement (however limited) was key to accessing to participants.

3. ~~The Gurdwaras place a central and key role in the lives of many people in the community.~~ Understanding the differences between Gurdwaras, their leaders and committees, the hierarchies within them and the Gurdwaras' differing spiritual attitudes towards alcohol consumption.

4. Working with the gender bias of social interactions was also a key challenge.

Power and politics: ~~the solutions~~reflections on the way forward

In social work education and practice, reflections on professional and personal power are often conducted with the goal of minimising the power differential between social worker and service user through a range of interpersonal skills or using statutory powers carefully and mindfully. The spirit should be one of partnership working, empathy, warmth and humility. The challenge in dealing with the power dynamics faced within this study was to acknowledge that professional power had to be embraced and used in order to facilitate potential access to participants. On a number of occasions, the Principal Investigator (PI) ~~of this study~~ needed to make contact with people ~~either in person or through email contact~~ when little or no response was received from the ~~researcher's~~ other researchers' contact. The most

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senior researcher (PI) talking to the most senior people in various community agencies opened some doors that were otherwise closed. ~~At this point reassurance was also sought from the PI about the funder's intention of developing genuine partnership working and not 'parachuting in white services' or imposing them on the community. Thus the PI was positioned as a representative of the funding agency in the eyes of some individuals in spite of her independence from the agency.~~

Often these senior people were the gate keepers of their organisations and other networks to which they belonged. Thus it was important to make the links between individuals and the range of organisations in which they participated or belonged. Identifying gate keepers was particularly noticeable when access to potential female participants was restricted in one Gurdwara. ~~The researchers were not allowed to speak to the women serving in the Langar Hall, but this obstacle was overcome through continuous accumulation of knowledge of the power arrangements, the team's persistent presence in the locality and continuing to build rapport.~~

The gendered nature of social interactions was observable throughout this research, even though Sikhism is clear about the importance of equality in terms of both class and gender. There are culturally traditional roles which need to be understood; for example, in each Gurdwara, the researchers were referred to the men who ran the Gurdwara's committee. Our observations were that women were unlikely to serve on the committees. Women are perceived, however, to hold the power in the household and within the family. Such gendered attitudes needed to be understood and negotiated in the dynamic nature of the research process.

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Power dynamics form part of the style and characteristics of every Gurdwara, as they do for every religious institution. There were spiritual differences in how people viewed alcohol, reflected in the particular attitudes of Gurdwaras. Some were more tolerant and empathic than others, with some Gurdwaras possessing strong negative attitudes or beliefs about people with alcohol problems. In contrast, one Gurdwara's founding history was based on a revered female Sant ('a spiritual teacher') having established a refuge for the needs of Punjabi Sikh women who had endured domestic violence - reportedly stemming from alcohol use - making it particularly receptive to supporting people to address their alcohol problems. ~~This Gurdwara even held internal discussions about setting up a mutual aid group for people struggling with alcohol problems. Another Gurdwara hosted individuals on a regular basis to perform 'sewa' in the Langer Hall as part of their community service dispensation from the criminal justice system, providing the requisite hours of constructive activities to make amends for involvement in criminal actions. This took place under the supervision of the Giani (religious officiant at the Gurdwara) who displayed a positive attitude towards people who were struggling to overcome problems with alcohol and drugs. It is the acceptance of people making these reforming efforts that make it a likely venue to have conversations about alcohol needs and to host service provision.~~ One Giani was adamant that there were no alcohol problems at the Gurdwara at which he officiated which needed to be addressed, stressing the strict religious injunction in forbidding the use of alcohol although he acknowledged the problem of street drinkers. This left the researchers contemplating the boundaries of research and how you have to work with pre-existing attitudes in the community where people can deny and minimise the extent of the problem and how these can be overcome. Continuing to build credibility

through respectful interaction, discussion and (where appropriate) debate may eventually lead to a reappraisal on the part of some stakeholders who may at first be suspicious or unaware of the health risks of heavy alcohol use or who fear being labelled or stereotyped in some way. Further, retaining an awareness of the political sensitivities around how alcohol is perceived in the Punjabi Sikh community was extremely important. The community continues to receive conflicting messages about alcohol as many of their religious leaders condemn its use from the 'stage' [preaching platform] of the Gurdwara, while the media and external influences advocate consumption, with its use valorised in Punjabi folk songs and music videos.

This paper will now turn to look at the implications of these challenges for social work education.

Implications for Social Work Education

The CASP research project affords an effective bridge of influence for social work education internationally, both as a case study in research mindedness and in highlighting particular key methodological lessons in undertaking real world research that reverberate into social work practice. In particular, it is unique in its attention to substance use within a Punjabi Sikh community and the sensitivity of discussing the topic with people across a range of ages and roles within the community. The engagement with research participants reflects engagement skills across all domains and sectors of social work. How to broach sensitive issues in a way that maintains a positive relationship is a central skill in social work as is how to work with clients in an empowering way to garner their support in identifying and addressing problems and implement change. The ethnographic approach represents a pedagogical

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learning process in a naturalistic setting, where social work students can reflect on a number of social work competencies. These include debates and contestation surrounding the promotion of cultural competence and religious literacy, in celebrating or validating difference, alongside working in an anti–oppressive (AOP) way (Dominelli and Campling, 2002, Thompson, 2012; Dalrymple and Burke, 2006). As Burke and Harrison (2002) stress, the demands of working in an AOP way, involves continuous reflection and evaluation of practice, ensuring a critical analysis of the issue of power, and challenging existing ideas, perceptions and practices. These are factors germane to both social work and research. Care must be taken to foster a heterogeneous and differentiated view of the Punjabi Sikh community as well as the dynamic nature of ethnic and cultural identity within this social group. Specifically, this study provides learning about the religio-cultural tension between tenets of Sikhism and the lived reality of the faith and its challenges in addressing problems with alcohol. The CASP study shows how excessive alcohol use is a social problem which operates at multiple levels in society from the micro, through to the meso and macro; it holds the dialectical tension between agency and structure and endorses Mill's (1999) sociological imagination in the intersection between biography and history. Furthermore, the research reveals the nuances and complexities of developing partnership working as an outsider with religious and cultural institutions and organisations. Features of community empowerment are seen as embedded within these social and political relationships (Adams 2008).

This case study accentuates the tandem of hard and soft skills within social work research and practice. For example, perseverance is vital to both good research and effective social work practice in showing tenacity in the face of pressures to quickly

close cases or drop pursuing leads. This can lead to better research and client outcomes. An awareness of 'white services parachuting in' is a lesson in understanding about power and white privilege. Successful communication is about 'meaning making' and is about more than just a facility with the written and spoken word, where sophisticated and nuanced interpretation, and understanding the subtlety of representation, is required.

Gunaratnam (2003a,b) believes it is important for people from different backgrounds to have '-dialogue across difference' in order to reach a shared understanding in research and practice-; to take time to explore meanings through discussion as part of the process of knowledge creation. This is a fundamental lesson from our study about how to develop a community alcohol support package; it demands learning from the other about their different cultural world view . It is about combining different perspectives (Healy 2005) and being critically aware of the factors that influence the production of knowledge. This means that every aspect of the research is open to scrutiny and challenge (Humphries and Truman, 1994). Critical reflection is an apposite practice skill forwith which practitioners tocan critically question- their -knowledge claims (Fook 1999). D'-Cruz et al. (2007: 83) have defined it as 'a critical stance in relation to how power and knowledge is generated' and applied (D'Cruz et al., 2007: 83). Understanding can alter expectations, associations and interpretations through a sensitive ethnographic approach that is equally informative for social work practice.

Conclusion

The ethnographic approach to this research, in seeking to avoid stereotyping and essentialising the community, provided an effective means of approaching the sensitive issue of problematic alcohol use and its associated stigma and secrecy. Understanding the perspective of people who are not all willing to engage with this issue, facilitated greater honesty and openness than may have otherwise been forthcoming. There are suspicions about outsiders imposing their solutions, as a further product of the established framework of coloniality (Sian, 2013) and there is clearly a need for proper partnership working to avoid common pitfalls and take future service developments forward (Dickinson and Glasby 2010). The political sensitivities and power dynamics have to be recognised if a genuine solution to the alcohol-related health concerns with the Punjabi Sikh community is to be achieved. First of all this means that there needs to be an acknowledgement of the problem and then a willingness to respond, from within the community itself. The lessons for social work practice are reflected in the methodological challenges of this research which, in addition to promoting and improving research mindedness, debate the issues surrounding cultural competence and religious literacy generally, and specifically in relation to alcohol use.

As is often the case in social work practice, this research needed to minimise, manage, and mitigate the threatening aspects of the research, such as concerns about stigmatization and confidentiality, without compromising the research integrity. A willingness to learning quickly about communities and cultures that are new and being aware of what you do not know are vital ingredients for effective cross cultural communication in research and in practice.

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