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The legacy of Covid-19: A case example of changing research practices as a representation for wider research method changes following the pandemic

Introduction to the case study

An inductive case study approach explored the inter-professional experience of qualified health and social care professionals and university social work students in practice. This qualitative and social constructivist methodology enabled social work and health care participants to co-construct and create new knowledge to inform preparing future students for practice inter-professionally. The study took place within a University in England.

The research questions explored the facilitators and barriers to developing inter-professional practice skills as student social workers. A drawing exercise was used as a creative and visual research tool within the focus groups with professionals and interviews with students. This drawing exercise helped identify themes across the four data sets. The shift to remote working was a reoccurring theme within the interviews and reported as a barrier to engagement by participants in the research.

A key disruptor to the initial research process was the emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic. Research and practice were impacted (Nind et al 2021), and ethical reviews of research found:

- Shift to remote work affected collaboration in research
- A different prioritisation of studies being supported (understandable focus on Covid related and positivist research)
- The need to adopt different digital platforms and tools
- Staff potentially less available due to redeployment, ill health or caring responsibilities
- Research funding may have been displaced for new priorities
- Time available given additional responsibilities at work and home

'I think what's benefited is the use of teams and technology because you can just contact people that you probably wouldn't have been able to, maybe access before because of offices or didn't know them. ..You can just jump on a teams call, and so I think that's really improved multi team working, interprofessional working. Yeah, I think the virtual world and the virtual tutorials have been quite difficult.' Student 2

Impact of Covid-19 changing research practices

The pandemic highlighted a focus on inter-professional practice for health care and preventative care. Many research projects were 'disrupted, paused or abandoned' (Sy et al 2020). Research and practice in this area were hit equally hard and demonstrated an unpreparedness for such an event, despite warnings from other international health scares e.g., Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus (SARS-CoV) in 2002. Middle East Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus (MERS-CoV).

This case study required modifying and consideration of the ethics and relevance of continuing the study. The recruitment strategy planned had to be further amended several times before recruits were engaged. It was clear potential students exercised their agency and did not respond to invitations.

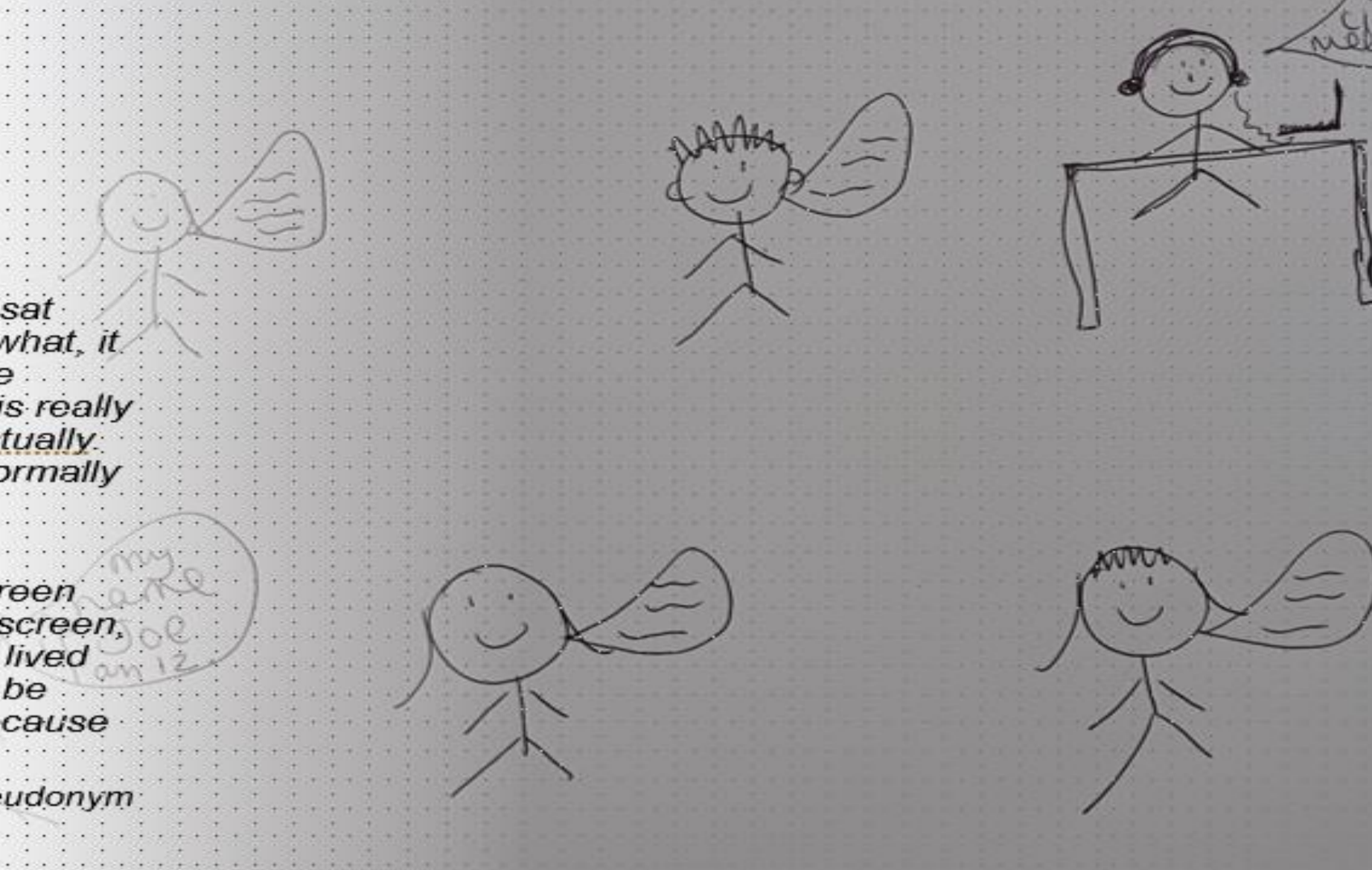
The original focus groups, that had worked well in person were adapted to be online semi-structured interviews (n=7 students). The longitudinal aspect of the study was revised to include inviting all newly qualified graduates of the social work programme since 2021 (n=211 of which 6 graduates responded).

References

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Unexpected finding from case study data

Student visual representations of their experiences



'OK, unfortunately I'm probably going to be sat behind this computer screen because that's what, it tends to be at the moment... I'm at the table because I don't know where everybody else is really sitting. Some of them might be in their car actually. [laugh] That sometimes happens, they are normally at a desk as well...'

'...maybe it's less intimidating to be on a screen because everybody's just a box on a... on a screen, whereas in a room, maybe they [person with lived experience] find it a bit more intimidating, to be honest. I've not really ever asked anyone, because we're just doing them online...'

Joe is a pseudonym

Online interviews have potential to engage the participant in the research at a different level and offers an opportunity to equalise the power differential between researcher and participant. The process of completing a drawing, photographing it and uploading and sending it to the researcher enabled a different exchange. The participant was invested in the process, and it created a different rapport building phase to the interview.

This example from the case study shows what inter-professional practice felt like in Covid-19 for one student. Online Zoom/Teams structure of people in different spaces. Many months later the student participant was able to reflect through the research on whether the family preferred this way of working and this opens further opportunities to research.

'And of course I think because we were the first, ... you know we were in our final year where we went into COVID, and we were on our placements. So, we didn't know what was going to happen. We didn't even know what was happening in the world. And I think what did come from it, was you know, if I felt like I was and I still feel like this. And just because unfortunately you missed that time in the team where you would usually shadow and everything which I didn't get to do. We spoke on teams. Everyone spoke on teams all the time but.... It's not quite the same as being in a space with people' Graduate 4

Conclusion

There is a need to understand the inter-professional practice experience of social work students and how this now needs to keep pace with the environments they are practicing in: From this case study learning included:

- Inter-professional practice is increasingly important to understand and how collaboration amongst professionals will safeguard the interests and care of the people we work with. Covid-19 challenged practice at the time, and we need to understand what works in research and practice as hybrid work practices emerge
- Developing evidence-based quality online training opportunities for all levels of inter-professional practice
- Use the technical developments from the pandemic to broaden opportunities for students on different qualifying professional programmes to work together.
- Created opportunities to explore innovative methods for reflective practice.
- Explored new ways to collaborate within research using online platforms. These new methods potentially support empowering the participant in the process.
- The potential to develop new approaches supporting co-creation of knowledge both within (*intra*) and across (*inter*) professionals.
- The importance of health and social care research, practice and learning to focus on the impact of climate change to manage global emergencies
- There is a need to consider the impact of digital inclusion e.g., over representation of some groups, or inclusion of only those who are more confident with online platforms
- With the rapid move from in-person to online, does research now need new ways of interrogating data for its validity and appropriateness.
- With increased use of online methods there are implications for enhanced data management

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