

## UNTOLD STORIES OF FIELDWORKERS WORKING AMID ADVERSE CONDITIONS

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*Working in unfamiliar contexts and often alone, fieldworkers may face challenges for which their training and previous experience has not prepared them. While there is literature about the technical, ethical and moral aspects of fieldwork, there is little focusing on fieldworkers' actual experiences. Additionally, there is little constructive discussion regarding coping strategies for fieldworkers, resulting in underpreparedness for fieldwork challenges. The article had two aims: firstly, to share fieldworkers' experiences by drawing on fieldworker journal entries; and secondly, to encourage reflective debate about fieldwork conducted in harsh fieldwork settings. Concerning the former, emerging themes include pre-fieldwork training; the site; the first day; role confusion and boundary setting; working with people from similar backgrounds; dealing with deception, emotions and feelings; and learning to cope. We therefore argue for rigorous training concerning matters related to the field setting before commencement of data collection, systematic documentation of context-specific challenges, and continuous debriefing.*

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**A**s a primary site of data collection, the research field continues to change. But despite earlier work by Samarin (1967) and others, there have been minimal changes in the literature, particularly regarding preparing fieldworkers for fieldwork (Newman, 2009) specifically in HIV affected communities in Sub-Saharan Africa. And while practical training is an integral part of preparation for fieldwork, such training devotes little, if any, attention to the practical and emotional challenges that may be

encountered during and after fieldwork, specifically fieldwork in environments or communities characterized by adversity. This lacuna may negatively affect the development of coping strategies and result in fieldworkers being underprepared to deal with challenges in the field. Other than a few publications such as Samarin (1967), Newman & Ratliff (2001), Newman (2009), Clark (2012), and Thomson, Ansons and Murison (2013), academic literature rarely discusses fieldworkers' experiences in the field (e.g., ethical challenges and the emotional baggage confronted before, during and after field experiences). To our knowledge, virtually no work has been published in this regard, especially related to HIV-affected communities in South Africa. Part of the reason for the lack of this kind of research is that the dominant research paradigm endorses objective writing but discourages post-structuralist or feminist approaches which encourage reflection in the research process.

The concept of fieldwork has been extensively defined (Crane & Angrosino, 1992; Denzin, 1994; Schensuls, Schensuls & LeCompte, 1999; Scheyvens & Storey, 2003). Wolcott (2005) notes that fieldwork has both a "broad meaning," characterized by personal immersion in ongoing social activities, and a "narrow one," which is limited to gathering data. The current study fits in with the narrow view, as it focuses only on the part of the research process when the fieldworker is in the field to collect data (Wolcott, 2005). Even in studies that follow the narrow view, however, the enduring emotional impact on fieldworkers cannot be ignored. In this regard, Thomson et al. (2013) wrote that, while the practical challenges of collecting data are expected, there are also deeper, more serious challenges that face fieldworkers.

One of these challenges is gaining trust in contexts characterized by shame, secrecy and silence. In order to do so, the research fieldworker has to get behind the masked front of normalcy that is often presented during office interviews. This means going beyond the public transcript and gaining access to participants' homes and information that is privileged and usually sensitive. In this regard, while proper training helps fieldworkers to gain participants' trust and ensures confidentiality, it does not necessarily guarantee that participants will

engage with fieldworkers or allow them into their homes. Another challenge experienced by fieldworkers working on a long-term project is that they spend a considerable amount of time in the field, not only collecting data but also entering people's lives. When the research is over, the fieldworkers have to leave the human subjects behind in living conditions that are often difficult, while the fieldworkers drive back to their "normal" lives.

This article challenges the positivistic assumption regarding fieldworkers' ability to keep their distance and contain their emotions while conducting fieldwork in communities living in adverse conditions. Instead, the paper advances the ontological assumption of "inverted perspective" (Moustakas, 1990). This perspective promotes a process of self-dialogue and is guided by the principle that knowledge grows out of direct human experience and can be discovered through self-inquiry and indwelling – the willingness to gaze with unwavering attention onto some facet of human experience in order to understand its constituent qualities and wholeness (Moustakas, 1990). The inverted perspective emphasizes fieldwork that is negotiated, aware, and responsive to the particular research environment, which avoids the cold detachment encouraged by positivism (Wong, 1998) and which seeks to provide particular descriptions (Valsiner, 2002).

This article adds to the literature reviewed above by honing in on the experiences of fieldworkers undertaking lengthy fieldwork in communities characterized by adversity. Adversity can be defined both broadly and narrowly. For the purpose of this article, adversity is defined as social or economic disadvantage, often as a result of structural inequality or traumatic incidents such as loss and bereavement (Haviland, 2000; Daniel, Wassell & Gilligan, 1999). The research approach is rooted in a postmodern, ethical decision model based on feminist philosophy (Denzin, 1997). According to the model, fieldworkers are not merely neutral observers but are rather fully involved role players who can be expected to account for their actions (Scheyvens, Nowak & Scheyvens, 2003).

The primary aim of this article is to share fieldworkers' experiences in order to demonstrate why fieldworkers need to be prepared during their training for the aforementioned

fieldwork issues. This preparation is particularly important for fieldwork undertaken in communities facing adverse conditions. The article is based on journal entries made by fieldworkers conducting a study on the emotional and behavioral health of children affected and infected by HIV and AIDS in South Africa. During the study, research-fieldworkers spent three years (2010-2013) in the field going door-to-door and conducting structured interviews with participants to collect clinical data.

## Methods

This is a reflexive qualitative study based primarily on case studies. Reflexivity requires researchers to come out from behind the protective barriers of objectivity, to remain human in their research relationships, and to invite others to join with them in the research and learning processes (Etherington, 2007). A case study is an intensive empirical inquiry of a single unit that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context (Babbie & Mouton, 2001; Yin, 2003). Because the boundaries between fieldwork training and the actual fieldwork experience are not clearly evident, a case study approach was chosen as it would best reveal specific fieldwork challenges.

Prior to this study, little was published in peer-reviewed journals regarding the challenges of conducting fieldwork in adverse contexts. In order to explore these challenges in-depth and capture the first-hand experiences of the fieldworkers, this study used qualitative data, specifically descriptive journal recordings. This was done in an attempt to understand human experiences from the perspective of the social actors themselves (Babbie & Mouton, 2001), in other words to gain an insider's perspective. The journals allowed fieldworkers to record their thoughts, memories, feelings and experiences in a private, safe, non-judgemental and subjective environment. While other qualitative approaches (e.g., semi-structured interviews at the end of the fieldwork experience) would have been informative as well, the journals allowed the fieldworkers to record their experiences over time without being prompted or cued by an interviewer.

## Participants and Setting

For the initial study, four Sesotho-speaking fieldworkers were contracted for 2.5 years in order to collect data about 250 HIV/AIDS orphans, 250 children orphaned by other circumstances and 250 non-orphans from the same township community. Data was collected through interviews with the children, their primary caregivers and their teachers. We espoused convenience sampling with regard to the selection of four fieldworkers for the study. Two of the fieldworkers possessed an honor's degree in psychology and the other two had a bachelor's degree in human and social sciences. Furthermore, all of the fieldworkers had some fieldwork experience and a long-standing working relationship with the research center coordinating the project. Three fieldworkers were female and one was male, a typical gender split in the social sciences. Although some may interpret the inclusion of three females and only one male as gender bias, this was not intentional. It was explained by convenience fieldworker's recruitment. Furthermore, caretaking in South Africa is almost always the responsibility of females, so the adult participants were almost exclusively female. Added to that, the local culture is patriarchal. Therefore, it was decided that participants would likely be more comfortable opening up to female fieldworkers.

The fieldworkers interviewed the orphans, caregivers and teachers regarding the children's mental health. Emotional-behavioral disorders were captured using the computerized "Diagnostic Interview Schedule for Children" (DISC-IV), which is a tool commonly used to assess psychiatric disorders in children and adolescents in epidemiological studies. The DISC-IV was originally designed for use by laypersons and includes over 30 diagnoses from the DSM-IV, DSM-III-R and ICD-10. It follows a highly structured format and is respondent based, thereby reducing the need for clinician decision-making (Shaffer, Fischer, Dulcan, & Schwab-Stone, 2000). In addition, a demographics questionnaire and a verbal autopsy questionnaire (Hosegood & Timaeus, 2004) were also administered, the latter to determine the cause of death of the children's parent(s). The verbal autopsy questionnaire collects information about the signs, symptoms and demographic characteristics of a recently deceased person from an individual

(usually family member) familiar with the deceased. The information is then given to a physician for assessment and pronouncement of the probable cause of death.

The fieldworkers received specific training on how to administer the data-collection measures and questionnaires. They also received training about fieldwork in general, the field site, the importance of establishing relationships to facilitate entry, the ethnographer as a self-reflective tool of inquiry (Schensuls et al., 1999), the pains and gains of fieldwork (Ferraro, 2001), personal safety and risk management, diversity, ethical conduct and appropriate behavior (described by Newman (2009) as the human factor in fieldwork). However, training did not include material on how people actually did their fieldwork or on the challenges that could be encountered. A full-time project manager was appointed both to oversee the logistical and administrative aspects of the project and to monitor, supervise and support the fieldworkers. Anticipating that research participants might have needs or enquiries about social security or mental health services, fieldworkers were provided with a list of where such services could be accessed locally.

Fieldwork was conducted in the formerly-black township of Mangaung (Bloemfontein) in the Free State Province of South Africa. The orphans and families that were interviewed by the fieldworkers lived either in low-cost government-built housing or shacks (constructed mainly of corrugated iron). The houses (around 28 – 46 meters<sup>2</sup>) generally consisted of two bedrooms, a living area, and a kitchen, whereas the shacks were usually small open-plan structures that sometimes had curtains to divide the space into a bedroom and a living room. Although participants had a roof over their heads, the houses were often overcrowded, leading to privacy issues and concerns about confidentiality during the interviews. Infrastructure in Mangaung is generally poor: the streets are not tarred, some residents still use the bucket toilet system and sewage runs through the streets.

The fieldworkers faced many challenges: the fieldwork site itself, the intensity of the instruments used, the large sample size (approximately 188 children per fieldworker), the duration of the interviews (approximately 1.5 hours per household) and the sensitive nature of the

research. Because of all these difficulties, there were concerns that the fieldworkers might secure other employment and cancel their contract. Fortunately, all the fieldworkers saw the project through, probably due to either the scarcity of job opportunities or their loyalty to the university, the project or their project manager.

### *Data Collection and Analysis*

Standard ethical procedures of gaining informed consent and ensuring confidentiality were followed throughout the study, and the project-management timeline allowed for opportunities to reflect on the progress and challenges of the research project. Therefore, the project team became aware of the heavy burden placed on the fieldworkers as a result of the intensity of the interviews and the adverse circumstances in which the participants lived. In addition to ensuring that the fieldworkers received enough support from the project manager, we developed a way to gain insight into the fieldworkers' experiences using qualitative methodology.

Daily journal recordings and focus-group discussions were utilized both to gain insight into fieldworkers' experiences and to improve the quality and credibility of the data. Fieldworkers were encouraged to keep daily journals in order to reflect upon their responses, beliefs, and feelings about the research in progress. The journal recordings also helped to triangulate the data, as there were now two sets of recorded data: the formal measures/questionnaires and the fieldworkers' journal entries (Janesick, 1999). The focus group discussions consisted of open-ended questions asked in a conversational style rather than a formal question-and-answer format. Fieldworkers' journal recordings and the focus group transcripts were scrutinized to facilitate an understanding of the fieldworkers' experiences and to identify various themes. This method of data analysis is referred to as thematic content analysis and results in a descriptive presentation of data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Vaismoradi, Turunen & Bondas, 2013). We first had to transcribe journals for data analysis. We then read the journals noting items of interest and re-examined the text carefully for relevant incidents of data for each theme. The process involved authors' independent search through the raw data in

order to identify recurrent patterns. In the final stage, we re-examined final construction of the themes using all material relating to it. Although we had knowledge of the broader study, the fieldworker's journal presented a unique phenomenon to all of us, and we could not claim expertise in the research topic. The process involved induction, to create themes and deduction in order to verify them; these were cross-checked during focus group interview for exclusion and inclusion.

While we are cautious of underplaying the critical role of the researcher, conscious effort was made to give expression to the voices of the fieldworkers. Every attempt was made to use the actual words of the fieldworkers when identifying themes, and the themes were grouped so as to be an accurate reflection of the text as a whole. Although some interpretation is inevitable in the process of sorting and naming themes, it was kept to a minimum. As a cross-check technique, themes were used to facilitate the focus group discussions.

This article aims to advance an argument for context-specific fieldwork training by exploring the themes identified in the journal entries. Unedited vignettes from the journals and excerpts from the focus group transcripts are used as supporting evidence. While acknowledging that pre-fieldwork training does occur, we argue that it lacks the nuance and the specificity that is required to truly prepare fieldworkers for the challenges of the field (Clark, 2012).

## Results

The results are presented in terms of the eight key themes that arose: pre-fieldwork training, the fieldwork site, getting through the first day, role confusion and boundary setting, working with people from a similar demographic background, dealing with deception, dealing with emotions and feelings, and learning to cope.

### *Pre-fieldwork Training and Experience*

Fieldwork training and prior fieldwork experience are generally thought to help fieldworkers in new fieldwork situations. But is this actually the case? Is previous fieldwork training and experience an advantage when working in an adverse environment? Fieldworkers' journal

reflections on their previous fieldwork training and experiences read as follows:

Fieldworker 2: I have worked with HIV patients before and I have been doing fieldwork for years now but this project was something totally different because I was going to deal with children and I've never done that before. These were orphans that I will have to work with them every day and that sounded to me like a challenge, and I needed that, but this was like [being] thrown into a deep end.

Fieldworker 1: The first time I worked as a fieldworker was in 2004 in a project that dealt with HIV-infected people's mental wellness and the training was done in Cape Town but the work was done in various clinics around Bloemfontein. We would interview patients about their mental well-being and the most difficult part of that process was that sometimes the nurses will bring the person who just found out that they were [HIV] positive, and that was hard for both fieldworkers and patients and that was not on the protocol.

Fieldworker 3: I will like to start by saying that I've been in, I've been doing fieldwork for a couple of years now. I will say for, maybe since 2002 or 2003 somewhere there. And, what I noticed. Ok, this project is a little bit different compared to what I have been doing. Somehow it felt like [my] first experience of fieldwork. Unending challenges [one] after another make you feel like you don't know what you doing.

All fieldworkers reported having had previous fieldwork experience, including emotionally loaded interviews in other research projects. However, they also noted that the current project brought unique challenges for which they were not prepared. While being cautious not to underplay the importance of training and prior experience, it appears as if previous experience is not always enough to prepare fieldworkers for contexts characterized by adversity.

### *The Fieldwork Site*

Fieldwork was conducted in an area that is impoverished in terms of infrastructure and resources (e.g., electricity, running water, and sanitation). Most of the caregivers in the study are older and either retired or unemployed, relying on government grants, pensions, or assistance from charity or neighbors. The fieldworkers became aware of the very high levels of need and poverty of the community on whom they were collecting data. Just having to go into and witness this kind of deprivation raised emotions of sadness and anxiety, and fieldworkers realized that some participants may seek assistance from them or see them as a route to financial or other material support. The following journal entries describe the difficult living conditions of participants with which the fieldworkers had to cope:

Fieldworker 1: There is nothing inside the house, not even a single chair. They cook outside with wood every day. When I went there for an interview, the children were very dirty, and their grandmother said they did not have soap to do laundry as well as bath soap for children to bathe and go to school. The kids also spent [a] few days at home not going to school because of the above reasons. The kids were taken to child welfare since there was no care from parents, but the grandmother took them back. Some do not get grant[s] because the mother does not have an Identity Document, they also do not have birth certificates. The conditions they are living in are not right at all, the aunt is always drunk and windows are all broken as well as door handles.

Fieldworker 4: This household has 13 people all under a 4 roomed house. All the household members are depending on the money from grants of which one is a foster care grant and four is child grant[s], therefore it [the money] is not enough to take care of them all. Most children are household head's grandchildren, some of their mothers are there and some lives elsewhere and in certain months they just collect grant[s] from SASSA (South African

Social Security Agency) offices and do not bring it home. So during the month there is no food or even electricity in the house. Granny tries everything in her power to make sure that they are well looked after.

The context described above demonstrates that the fieldwork was conducted in a challenging environment characterized by extreme poverty. This difficulty was compounded by the fact that the fieldworkers had to use formal research tools in order to interview participants about the socio-emotional health of the children, which is in itself a difficult topic of conversation. Another issue in such fieldwork context is that of confidentiality, which was difficult to guarantee during the interviews because the houses were small and lacked privacy.

### *Getting Through the First Day*

On the first day of fieldwork, the fieldworkers experienced emotions such as unease, insecurity, and stress, and some participants were unclear as to who the fieldworkers were (see 'role confusion' below). In the initial stages of fieldwork, much can go right and equally much can go wrong. Fieldworkers interrogate their practical arrangements or technical preparation to do fieldwork, make their own decisions, and develop their own techniques to respond to the unique challenges of the fieldwork site. The following excerpt gives an idea of what the fieldworkers were confronted with on the first day in the field:

Fieldworker 1: This was my first interview, and feeling a bit uneasy, but the granny was looking forward to this interview. But she is worried as she did not have anything to offer me; she was very excited, thinking that I'm a social worker coming to help with her naughty boy. My first interview, [and I was] already stressed by the reality of what is really going on in our communities. This little boy is not well taken care of, but anyway he stays with gran and spends most of his time in the street, only comes home to eat and sleep.

The challenges did not end after the first day, and frustration seemed to build – not due to any incompetence on the part of the fieldworkers but, rather, due to their inability to

help with the needs they encountered. A further source of frustration was the fieldworkers' perceived lack of preparation for the challenges of conducting fieldwork in communities characterized by adversity. For example, one journal entry read:

Fieldworker 4: Kids are hungry and the only available food is soft porridge. Poor people like many kids, why? Projects like these are draining emotionally, and lunch is a must, not because I'm going to eat but just to take a break from many problems I come across for the whole day.

### *Role Confusion and Boundary Setting*

Another theme we noted from the data analysis was that of confusion regarding the fieldworkers' role and the difficulty of maintaining boundaries. It was clear from the very first contact that many participants had the expectation that the fieldworkers were social workers or other helping professionals there in order to provide assistance. Thus, fieldworkers faced the dual challenge of both staying in the role of fieldworker (as opposed to community worker, social worker, community home-based carer or counselor) and not overstepping boundaries in the assistance they provided to families. The following extracts illustrate the nature of emerging roles while in the fieldwork site.

Fieldworker 1: It was difficult for me to maintain clear boundaries between my work and that of [being a] community worker or social worker. I suppose my other training somehow contributed. I found myself providing advice on how to secure children birth document so that the people can apply for a grant. Was I going to accompany them to both Home Affairs for identity documents and Social Development to apply for the grant? Maybe not, but I would easily give them transport money.

Fieldworker 2: The people look at you as though you [are] the messiah who came down to rescue them from the poverty. Yes, we gave them vouchers. I can still see their faces that light up because at least [they] were sleeping with food, but then ask myself

for how long? Hence I gave advice on how to at least access some resources from government.

### *Working with People from a Similar Demographic Background*

Sometimes it is assumed that sharing the same nationality, languages and culture provides a clear-cut advantage in terms of gaining access, building trust and ultimately establishing an ideal fieldworker-participant working relationship. These widely held assumptions can to a certain degree inform both choice of fieldwork site and recruitment of fieldworkers, in order to minimise the imagined difficulty emanating from differences with regard to participant-fieldworker demographic backgrounds. However, the sensitivity of the information and the context of the participants' lives meant that large differences did remain. For example, the fieldworkers were challenged to come to terms with the impact of the participants' lives on their bodies, with women aging at a far more rapid rate than would be true in a less deprived context; and the challenges of common courtesy where the participants, despite this poverty, felt obliged to offer the fieldworkers food or something to drink, leaving them feeling guilty. Given the sensitivity of the research topic and the nature of interview questions, was being from a similar demographic and cultural background helpful in gaining access to households and privileged information? This is how the fieldworkers responded:

Fieldworker 1: When I did the census, wanted to know how old is she. Instead of telling me, she said, "My Skat [darling], I know I look old but I'm 45. I had a lot of problems in my life and my kids died. We worked in farms. I'm not educated, I'm poor. A lot happened in my life, please understand." What could I say [other than] "I understand Mme?" She looks sick as her lips were protruding and were red and there was a very bad smell throughout the interview. But at least I was patient enough; maybe some people will not even sit next to her. I could not show her any sign of discomfort. These are our people. If I do not love her, who will? Ao!!!

It's sad. She looks 75 but she is only 45 years old.

Fieldworker 1: Old people they always want you to have something before you leave even if you tell them that you are just doing your job. She made some toasted bread and bought some soft drink for me. Anyway, that's our people and the way they were raised.

Fieldworker 1: Gaining trust from people is not an easy task. I went to this house, finished alles [everything] with the mother. I had to come for the child the following day. When I arrived the following day, she said she could not sleep because she gave me information about the child and was not sure as to whom I was. As a result, she described me to the child and asked her not to speak to me should I come to her school.

The challenge overlooked by the assumption of similarity is the expectation by participants that the "local" fieldworker would know. While we acknowledge that there are means to overcome this challenge, what remains unanswered is how the fieldworkers would make the familiar unfamiliar? In other words, how would fieldworkers observe context known to them with different lenses, and guard against slipping back into taken-for-granted modes of understanding places and peoples' routines?

### *Dealing with Deception*

Irrespective of the supposed advantages of working within one's own community and the presumed ease of establishing rapport, fieldworkers nonetheless questioned the honesty of some of the participants' responses. The participants appeared to want to hide behavior, problems, or information that they felt may leave them to be judged, such as mental health problems in the children or their own substance abuse. This was often very obvious, and placed the fieldworker in a difficult position in terms of how to interpret the responses. While this was not the norm, in some cases, the fieldworkers reported that what was told to them was different than what they observed.

Fieldworker 4: Sometimes caregivers are not telling the truth. You conduct an interview with her and she says the child is fine and [in] the next interview with the child, you see an anxious child. There is definitely something wrong with this child. I kept on telling him to relax but he was trembling. What is wrong? I do not know but there is something wrong.

Fieldworker 2: She is an alcoholic. Early in the morning she is drunk and denies it. Unfortunately it was smelling; she had withdrawal symptoms. I skipped one question on the child's Standardized Difficulty and Strength Questionnaire, so I went to her place, only to find that she [had] passed on shortly after our interview. But during the interview I did not see any sign of sickness except those withdrawal symptoms; I even offered her a cup of coffee. All those kids are left alone, and she was the one who was supporting the family with her grant. Sad, neh [isn't it]?

### *Dealing with emotions and feelings*

Fieldwork inevitably results in emotions and feelings that can sometimes become too much to handle, leaving fieldworkers helpless and hopeless. While fieldwork carried out in adverse conditions can be an eye-opening experience, it can also be deeply frustrating. The fact that fieldwork experiences can both reveal fieldworkers' limitations and stretch their capabilities is often overlooked. The fieldworkers spoke about the impact of these extreme stories on them and how they tried to cope, through prayer, philosophy (life must go on), focusing on the task of collecting data, and allowing themselves to cry or vomit to relieve the emotions. Many of these approaches were problematic, and would have brought, at best, short term relief. The entries below demonstrate how the fieldworkers' emotions and feelings were triggered throughout the study:

Fieldworker 1: She is HIV positive, was gang-raped at gunpoint in front of her husband and children. She pleaded with them not to rape her 12 year old



girl, so all of them raped her. The husband was ordered to keep quiet if he wants to live. She was crying for the duration of the interview. She is diabetic and thinks she is going to die and leave her kids alone. What a sad interview. This was a very tough, emotional day for me. I just wish I could distance myself from all of these [things], and just collect data.

Fieldworker 2: OK. It's life. It's fine. She is sick, spitting in the bucket, now and then. The next day or a day after that, she was dead. I was crying, I wished I would not have met her in the first place. She is no more. It's OK. Life must go on.

Fieldworker 4: And then sometimes you see just death, you see death nè [you know], literally because you, you look at this lady and say, this lady is sick. She can just die anytime. And then you look at the kids and it's, it's like these people don't have anything to eat. Next thing, this lady is sick and on the other day my heart was really broken I looked at this lady she was so sick and she said to me, "You know, I've been vomiting for the whole week." And I could see that this lady sooner or later she'll be gone.

Fieldworker 1: [Child's name] and her sister were taken by this lady as no one in the family wanted them. They were once raped so other family members said they will teach their children bad things. Her mother was killed by her boyfriend when she was only eight years old, in front of her. Her head was found at the dumping site. This is really depressing, and there is nothing I can do further, so I need to remember them in my prayers tonight. It's sad many kids are raped in the informal settlement and for some nothing has been done.

Fieldworker 2: Uh... you know as a fieldworker, you know, if you work with

these things every day, then you turn to internalise them and it's not something that you can look at and leave. And one of the frustrating things is that being a researcher sometimes it's so, it's very frustrating because you see things and there is little that you can do and you end up thinking like am I only here to collect data and do nothing about what I see? So you know, you know it's, it's not nice out there, it's not nice, sometimes I end up crying alone, literally crying. Because I look at, especially, I ... I'm really touched by HIV positive kids who are sick and because they are sick sometimes parents do not allow them to play with other kids.

### *Learning to Cope*

Despite the difficulties experienced in the field, the fieldworkers managed to deal with the challenges described above through techniques such as debriefing, supporting each other, prayers, family, and partners. The real role of support and having a space to debrief was emphasized by the fieldworkers. Just having someone to talk and offload was felt to be really important and the greatest source of relief. By virtue of being in the same situation, they felt they could share and gain support. The fact that two of the fieldworkers were married gave them a stronger source of support. The following exchanges from the focus group discussions illustrate this point:

Fieldworker 4: Just to echo my colleagues' sentiments, we need to...um ...debrief. Because we are emotionally...um...I don't know what's the words...emotional wrecks. [Laughter]

Fieldworker 2: Yeah! We are emotionally overloaded! I prefer to put it like that, yeah. ...Um...because we [are] dealing with a lot of issues and difficult circumstances.

Fieldworker 1: Again, nè [you know], sometimes I think of maybe why can't they maybe arrange debriefing maybe once a month [and] not only when we have to ask for it, you know, because these things, you know, and you

end up in bed, you know, and when you are in bed sometimes you feel like you need break from, you know, what, but sometimes [laughs] you have to deliver, both at work and home ... eish [dear me].

Fieldworker 2: You know, every morning before we start, we make coffee and talk about the challenges we faced on the previous day and that helps. To know that you [are] not alone is somehow reaffirming and help you to pick yourself up and face the new day with its prospective challenges. But it's not as easy as I say it now. You know it's ... I don't know ... all I can say ... you need a lot of courage and I am grateful for my colleagues.

Fieldworker 1: If I did not know where to cast my burdens, I would be an emotional wreck. I hardly miss a prayer before bedtime in the evening and before work in the morning. My family is also praying for me and it gives me strength.

Fieldworker 2: I am lucky because I am working with my man, we both experience the same things ... so he will understand when we get home, and sometimes before we come to office, we chat ... it helps ... [giggles].

### Discussion

The primary aim of this paper was to share the experiences of fieldworkers working in adverse environments. A secondary aim was to reflect on current practices and stimulate debate about the generic epistemological and methodological assumptions of fieldwork, especially in environments characterized by adversity. The findings suggest that the pre-fieldwork training we provided was inadequate and not enough support was made available to the fieldworkers during the research process. Whilst we do not underplay the importance of acknowledging the impact our research has on participants, we wish to draw attention to fieldworker's personal reflective journals after fieldwork amid adverse conditions.

We explore some of the issues raised by this paper for the whole fieldwork process and

suggest how a nuanced and negotiated approach is crucial and inevitable part of fieldwork. First, in terms of preparation and training, it is clear that preparing fieldworkers for the vagaries of the field is a very difficult task. The fieldworkers' experiences indicate that there often are no universal solutions to the challenges that arise when working in adverse conditions. General ethical and fieldwork guidelines do not sufficiently prepare fieldworkers to resolve the plethora of challenges that await them, as evidenced by the shock that our fieldworkers experienced doing their work in their own community. Instead, training should be specific to the context, site and project; the fieldworker's journals provide important information that can help develop such context-specific training. In this regard, we recommend adopting Wolcott's proposal (2005) that fieldworkers should respond to the unknowns of fieldwork by being adaptable and developing a "tolerance for ambiguity." Fieldworkers can be assisted in this endeavor through continuous support and a focus on reflexivity. Furthermore, we can also learn from what Cutcliffe and Ramacharan (2002) term the ethics-as-process approach. This can be seen as the golden standard for reviewing epistemological and methodological issues. Although Cutcliffe and Ramacharan's research (2002) focuses on the qualitative research process overall, it is nonetheless relevant to fieldwork training.

Fieldworkers, like all other professionals, benefit from past experiences, good organization and careful preparation. Nonetheless, unexpected challenges arise once fieldworkers enter the field, particularly when they are alone and working in communities facing adverse circumstances. Thomson, Ansoms, Murison (2013) emphasize that it is important to plan before entering the research site and to acknowledge that fieldwork is an uneven and messy process that could go in unexpected ways. However, Wellin and Fine (2001) note that it is difficult to prepare for the unpredictable, particularly because the field is neither static nor uniform, and each fieldworker and each field site is unique. Thus, specific preparation for fieldwork challenges is required, even though some hold the opinion that one can only truly learn about fieldwork by doing it (Osman & Casella, 2007; Wellin & Fine, 2001).

Given the fieldworkers' excerpts and the aforementioned unpredictability of fieldwork, the question is raised as to how best to prepare fieldworkers for the challenges they may face in the field. Dumont (1978) states that simply entering the field is probably the most dramatic and shocking part of fieldwork. Echoing that sentiment, Leslie and Storey (2003) maintain that although managing personal and emotional issues is a challenge, many fieldworkers see simply getting through the first day of fieldwork as an achievement. Thus, getting through the first day helps to provide the confidence that fieldworkers will need to face future challenges.

We believe that once in the fieldwork site, fieldworkers should always remain aware of how the fieldworker-participant relationship is developing and make adjustments during the fieldwork process as the need arises. As Mitchell (1991) notes, there often is a natural connection on both a cognitive and an emotional level between participant and fieldworker. But this connection creates challenges, which Samarin (1967) termed complexities of personal encounter. Similarly, O'Brien (2006) writes that when people come into contact with each other, unpredictable social realities and unforeseen circumstances are produced. Begley (2009) asserts that, when fieldwork is being conducted in a site where everyday adversity is a fact of life, this adversity also becomes the fieldworker's life. In other words, fieldworkers can sometimes end up embedding themselves within the realities (lived experiences) of those they study rather than keeping a distance. This site presented particular challenges as it left fieldworkers feeling hopeless in the face of overpowering poverty and hardship, substance abuse, and violence and abuse against others. The fieldworkers expressed this in their shock at the conditions under which people lived and the implications these conditions had for those people. This impacted the fieldwork process.

One of the consequences of these fieldworker-participant interactions as demonstrated by this study is that challenging fieldwork sites and difficult living conditions may compromise the privacy, confidentiality and ethical conduct of the interviews. Thus, although the fieldworkers in this study received general training regarding research ethics and were given some input about coping prior to entering

the field, the journal transcripts demonstrated that the unique difficulties of the fieldwork setting should have been considered during the initial planning phases of the research project. For instance, the reality of the participants' difficult living conditions and the impact in terms of boundary issues and emotions should have been an important part of the pre-research training and ethical clearance procedures.

Another consequence to note is the distinction between researcher and participant. Adler and Adler (1987) assert that this relationship has traditionally existed more strongly in theory than in practice and that objectification of the self has occurred in the analysis rather than the fieldwork. As this study has revealed, pre-fieldwork training was not sufficient to prepare fieldworkers for the situational challenges that they faced on site. Roles and boundaries between fieldworkers and participants became blurred, and the fieldworkers found it difficult to distance themselves from the emotionally loaded narratives of the participants and remain "objective." Therefore, in this study, the supposedly desirable, clear-cut distinction between fieldworkers and research participants was not present, which could have potentially compromised the fieldwork process. Although there is some literature that focuses on this issue (Kleinman and Copp, 1993; Lofland and Lofland 1984), which is perhaps helpful in some settings, we question the relevance of these tips for research in which fieldworkers are truly immersed in a community defined by adversity (Moustakas, 1990).

Titon (1985) contends that in every researcher-participant interaction, participants assign fieldworkers a role, which he terms *fieldworker stance*. Factors that may have played a part are the fieldworkers' professional behavior, dress or credentials implying that they were in a position of power. In addition, people living in impoverished areas sometimes have a culture of adversity in which people feel dependent and want help. Reinforcing the new role assigned to fieldworkers by participants was the nature of the questions in both the DISC-IV and the verbal autopsy that resulted in participants recalling experiences of death and grief (Ogora, 2013). As a result, the interviews were emotionally loaded and one can see how the role of fieldworker was confused with that of a

counselor. Furthermore, the nature of the questions in the demographic questionnaire may have also suggested to participants that fieldworkers were social workers who could help them with their problems. This role confusion and the creation of expectations poses a threat to the credibility of data in qualitative research, particularly if fieldworkers fail to report such troublesome interactions encountered in the field. Yet admitting to such interactions might call into question the fieldworkers' competence, ethical conduct, and professionalism (Van Maanen, Manning, & Miller, 1993).

Overall, this study revealed that, as fieldwork progressed, an enmeshed relationship with participants was almost inevitable. As stated by Kleinman and Copp (1993), qualitative research can trigger a powerful fieldworker-participant relationship, especially since the method is designed to explore the participants' context in detail and from the life experience of the participants. Therefore, the better the interview – the more intense the interaction and relationship. This occurs despite the ideal of professionalism in science (Kleinman & Copp, 1993) and the fact that fieldworkers are trained to maintain professional detachment and not become too involved. Thus, it seems as if fieldworker training does not sufficiently prepare them to navigate the grey area between attachment and detachment. Some of the reasons for fieldworkers becoming attached include the challenging content of research, the fieldworkers' emotional reactions, participants' difficult living conditions, and fieldworkers' identification with the research participants.

A second fieldwork working relationship complexity arises when working with participants from a similar demographic background. Most of the available literature focuses on the advantages of being a member of the group that one is studying (Chavez, 2008; Labaree, 2002; Ochieng, 2010; Sherif, 2001; Taylor, 2011). Being an insider automatically provides a level of trust and openness in participants that might not have been present otherwise. One has a starting point—the commonality factor—which affords access to groups that might otherwise be closed to "outsiders." Furthermore, participants might be more willing to share their experiences due to an assumption of understanding and shared distinctiveness—it is as if people

feel, as Acker (2000) notes, you are one of us and it is us versus them (those on the outside who don't understand).

Although shared status can be beneficial, it can also potentially impede the research process. For instance, a participant might make assumptions of similarity and therefore fail to explain her individual experience fully (see Ochieng, 2010 for the you-know-what-I-mean ethical and methodological challenges). Alternatively, a fieldworker may find it difficult to separate his or her own experiences from those of the participants. In the latter case, Acker (2000) warns that this could result in an interview that is shaped and guided by the researcher's experience rather than the participant's. Clearly, a blanket advantage cannot be assumed when fieldworkers share demographic characteristics with research participants, for it can impact both what participants tell and what fieldworkers say and record. As identified above, the fieldworkers battled to keep an emotional and professional distance. Our selection of staff close to the participants would have contributed to this. So while the practice is good in that it promotes good results, it also raises questions regarding both methodological and ethical issues of representation.

Representation is complicated by the fact that "it is a matter not only of lies told by fieldworkers...but also of lies told to fieldworkers" (Metcalf, 2002). In this regard, Ember and Ember (2000) write about the ideal versus the actual, arguing that researchers are often told what is ideal about a situation or a custom. Even when participants are comfortable with the presence of the researcher and the content of the conversations, they sometimes tell half-truths, lies and stories in order to present an image that they wish to portray (Reeves, 2010; Salamone, 1977). The transition from the ideal to the actual is negotiated and earned over time (Ember & Ember, 2000). In this study, as illustrated by excerpts on dealing with deception, the older participants were particularly concerned with maintaining a good image. While a fieldwork practice of checking and balancing what is told (ideal) against what is observed (actual) is inevitable, the difficulty is the ethical expectation of fieldworker's conduct, which usually requires that fieldworkers respect information provided by the participants. The methodological

challenge is the decision to either record what is told, which requires the ability to conceal emotions and frankness, or to question the discrepancies between the observed and told.

An often overlooked fieldwork challenge in adverse communities is the emotional toll on fieldworkers. The importance of protecting the participant from emotional threat appears in methodology debates. What is lacking, though, is the failure to acknowledge that when an in-depth face-to-face interview evokes emotions on the part of the participant, it might also be an emotional experience for the fieldworker. While it is important to note at this stage the lack of in-depth understanding of the emotional risks of fieldworkers, the fieldworkers ability to stick it out despite fieldwork emotional difficulties, and the ability to still gain access to the information needed, we also have to acknowledge the difficulty to anticipate emotional challenges as they can arise as a result of triggers that are only indirectly related to the research focus.

As demonstrated by the fieldworkers' journals, listening to and seeing people's often sad, overloaded stories posed difficulties for them. They acknowledge that some of the negative stories and powerful feelings displayed by participants were transferred, leaving them feeling helpless and vulnerable. The latter affirms Hubbard, Backett-Milburn, & Kenner (2001) and Scheyvens and Nowak's (2003) view that fieldwork blues are inevitable. Leslie and Storey (2003) agree, noting that regardless of the initial anticipation present when embarking on a new fieldwork project, surviving the field experience on a personal level is always a challenge. Fieldworkers often face emotions such as helplessness, anger, boredom, confusion, disgust, guilt, self-doubt, depression, frustration, and embarrassment, but for some reason these feelings are rarely discussed (Murphy, 2005). And while these emotions can be viewed as important opportunities for learning (Scheyvens & Nowak, 2003), the fieldworkers may carry emotional scars, which could influence both their work as fieldworkers and their lives outside of work, including putting additional pressure on personal relationships.

Therefore, it is important that fieldworkers learn to cope with the uncertainties of fieldwork. The fieldworkers in the current study

learned to cope by drawing strength from one another and from significant others. With regard to the latter, the support at home provided the necessary courage to face another day's challenges. Fieldworkers supported each other through informal debriefing sessions before and after site visits. Another source of support suggested by Pollard (2009) is an on-site supervisor, who can help to ease uncertainty and empower fieldworkers. The fieldworkers and the project manager in this study enjoyed a relaxed collegial relationship, but it seems as if the focus of their relationship was on getting the work done and little time was spent reflecting on the emotional issues encountered during fieldwork.

So to reflect, the professional level of support was done well in this study, but the emotional support was clearly inadequate. The team would have benefitted from a structured support system that was available on a regular and consistent basis. A number of difficulties faced by the fieldworkers have already been discussed. In addition to these difficulties, the end of the project meant the end of the fieldworkers' relationship with the participants (emotional cut-off) and the termination of their employment, since they were appointed contractually just for this study. Part of the problem lies in the inadequate resource and infrastructure backup behind the study organization. This arose partly due to unforeseen events during the fieldwork process not relating to the study, but clearly impacting on it. The literature reveals multiple instances in which fieldworkers experienced negative long term consequences. For example, Begley (2009) reports that her research left her emotionally drained and physically ill. Jourdan (2013), meanwhile, questioned his move from humanitarian work to research work, and Ogora (2013) wonders whether it is worth conducting research that requires participants to recount traumatic experiences.

Finally, Pollard (2009), while acknowledging the difficulties of fieldwork, also challenges fieldworkers to reflect upon traumatic fieldwork experiences and document counterfactual evidence that points to the benefits of working in the field. Despite facing a fair amount of adversity, not everything about fieldwork in this study was unpleasant. In the first place, this project afforded the fieldworkers with an

opportunity to experience the realities of Mangang first-hand, opening their eyes to the circumstances faced by orphans and their caregivers. The project also provided the fieldworkers with employment in a context of high unemployment and the opportunity to explore a potential career path. Finally, the fieldworkers had the opportunity to build new relationships with each other and with the participants. These rewards in relationship development need to be acknowledged (Reeves, 2010).

Although these four fieldworkers' experiences might not be universally generalizable, they nonetheless carry valuable lessons. These issues are often discussed informally between researchers, but through our work and that of others, it is hoped that this paper may benefit other fieldworkers and help prepare them for the challenge of working in communities defined by adversity. With this aim in mind, we draw on the findings to make recommendations to those embarking on long-term fieldwork in a community characterized by hardship.

### Limitations and Future Research

While we do not question the depth of the data emanating from the journal entries and focus group discussions, we acknowledge that there may have been other factors involved that were not accounted for in the data set. The study has limited account for external validity, and the study's internal validity, namely data saturation and generating data trail, is questionable due to the application of relatively few checks. The possibility that certain aspects which contributed to the fieldworkers' emotional baggage were overlooked is another limitation of the current study. Additionally, because this study followed a case study design and only four fieldworkers were involved, the generalizability of the study findings is questionable. Furthermore, the research project that the fieldworkers were involved in dealt with sensitive issues and was done in a severely depressed community. So the impacts felt here may not be felt in other communities. We relied exclusively on the fieldworker's journals and focus group interviews so there was no triangulation against other data.

This study reveals multiple opportunities for further research. One interesting theme for further exploration is the impact that the structured in-depth interview has on communities

living in adverse conditions. More specifically, we are intrigued by how participants in in-depth interviews define and interpret the role of the fieldworker. Another area of investigation is the long term impact that conducting fieldwork in challenging environments has on fieldworkers. As this study revealed, it can lead to both fieldwork blues (hardship, stress, etc.) and personal and intellectual growth. Exploring this grey area (rather than considering it to be an either/or situation) may even provide knowledge about how to improve the experience of fieldworkers.

Finally, the fieldworker-participants role confusion raises multiple ethical questions for further exploration. In this regard we ask: do fieldworkers have a responsibility to meet participants' expectations? How do fieldworkers ensure that their role is clear and that false expectations are not created? What if participants tell lies in order to make a certain impression on fieldworkers? How should fieldworkers capture information provided by participants if they suspect it is not true? How are fieldworkers supposed to handle these situations? Should researchers become selective as to where and who they research in order to avoid the unknown or situations that might compromise objectivity? These issues are often discussed informally between researchers, yet we hope that through our work and that of others, the epistemological and methodological implications of these issues for qualitative research, researchers, and fieldworkers will be given more attention.

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