

The long and winding road ... that leads to rural research

Anne Beeching-Steen, 500 Seabrook Road, Somerset, Tasmania, 7322, Clinical Psychologist, Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service, Burnie

This story emanating from the cow trough is not an uncommon one but sometimes it needs to be retold to remind us that treading the road of rural research is not an easy path to take.

The beginning of my journey ...

... began in Kent in the United Kingdom in 1963 when I passed the 11+ academic assessments. I qualified to attend Grammar School, the highest form of education at that time. As a youngster from a working class family this 'achievement' was celebrated by a slap on the bottom from my dad (I think it was affectionately meant) and £10 (a lot of money in those days). I bought a Bobby Vee LP! Not long after that my world collapsed when my father decided we would immigrate to Tasmania. I still remembering driving down a dark, winding road from Hobart to Franklin and everything looked grey and scary. I remember wondering if this was hell.

After eighteen months the family moved to Burnie, on the North West coast of Tasmania. Although this area has always been officially classified as rural, Burnie was then an industrial town with some very large industries. These included a paper mill, and Tioxide, a paint pigment extracting factory. Today, Burnie has changed. Its deep sea port brings cargo ships in daily and tourist ships to the town regularly. There is a continuing focus on farming (The North West coast is known as the vegetable bowl of Australia), and a growing focus on education and tourism. Burnie's surrounding areas of pristine environment are wonderful attractions to visitors.

I left High School after Grade 10 and worked until I married at 18. I provided the requisite pigeon pair of 2 children. The need to learn began to grow within me and when my marriage collapsed after 9.5 years I continued my journey along the long and winding road. My road meant I studied part time and worked full time. Couple this with studying in Distance Education mode, at a university in another state, and the pressure triples. I use the analogy of a volcano to explain how it feels to undertake this form of study. Everything bubbles along below the surface however some of the pressurised 'lava' erupts to the surface at times. In my case that normally means an explosion. My husband, family and pets have all learnt to hide when this happens.

In 1993 I commenced an arts degree majoring in Psychology and History which I completed in 1999. I then undertook a Post Graduate Diploma in Psychology between 2000 and 2002. Study, whilst working as a psychologist in mental health, proved very demanding and challenging. However, the more intensely I studied the more committed I became to learning and to research. In 2003 I was accepted into the Master of Psychology, Counselling programme in the School of Education at Monash University which included a research thesis.

The grades for my coursework improved dramatically and I gained an HD average for these units. After discussions with my research supervisor we decided I should convert to a Doctorate programme. Bureaucracy intervened and I was denied the conversion on the grounds I was too far into the Masters' programme. My supervisor brought my plight to the attention of a researcher in the School of Psychology and with their active support and endorsement I have recently been granted candidature in a PhD through the school of Graduate Research at Monash. I now have 8 years of part-time, distance education study to complete my PhD thesis in.

Whilst the above bureaucratic paperwork and necessary signatures were being obtained I cancelled my enrolment in the Masters' programme and was delighted to be informed I had been awarded a Master of Counselling degree due to the amount of work I had completed and my high grades.

Now, it is reasonable to suggest that once I had attained candidature in a higher degree that progress would become easier. But no! More pitfalls appear in the road. They are:

- 1 Do not involve children as research participants



2 Do not select a topic that is viewed as 'topical' and can raise people's emotional levels.

Let's take a slight detour from the road why I explain what I mean

I am a registered psychologist who works with children and adolescents at a mental health service in Burnie. I have an interest in working with people diagnosed with Borderline Personality Disorder. For my research I have focused on one symptom of this disorder, self-harm, and decided to investigate why self-harm is an emerging 'problem' within the adolescent population. I also recognise that self-harm occurs without an accompanying Borderline Personality Disorder diagnosis.

What factors contribute to self-harm behaviours? Contemporary literature and research published by Demuth & Brown, 2004¹; McAllister, M., 2005²; Ponnnet, K., Vermeiren, R., Jaspers, I., Mussche, Ruchkin, V., Schwab-Stone, M., and Deboutte, D, 2005³ found a relationship between family structure and self-harm behaviour did exist. According to Bowlby, 1988⁴; Hughes, 1997⁵; Waters, Crowell, Elliott, Corcoran and Treboux, 2002⁶, a relationship has also been found between attachment style and self-harm behaviour. Gender has been reported as another possible factor contributing to such behaviours by researchers including Hawton, K, Haw, C., Houston, K., and Townsend, E. 2002⁷; Hawton, K., Rodham, K., Evans, E., and Weatherall, R. 2002⁸; Hawton, K., Rodham, K., and Evans, E. 2006⁹; and Young, R., Van Beinum, M., and Sweeting, H., 2007¹⁰. However, I did not find any research literature that reported results considering the above factors concurrently. Subsequently, my research topic is:

"Type of family structure, type of attachment, gender, and their correlation with self-harm behaviours in adolescents".

Continuation of my journey

With modern technology, access to the online university library, electronic journals and of course, Amazon to buy books from, the literature review I undertook was a 'relatively' easy part of this journey. As with all literature reviews there will be continual upgrading and updating until I complete my research thesis.

My rural research journey became bogged down when I began to seek multiple ethical approvals.

- 1 Part of the population I want to investigate are 12 to 18 year old clients of mental health services. I decided to conduct a file audit of current and past clients whose file was coded for self-harm behaviours (X40 to X80). Due to an agreement between the government department which oversees mental health services, and the state university, ethical approval had to be obtained from the University of Tasmania.
- 2 A decision between me and my supervisors was made to obtain data from a 'non-clinical population', from within local public and private schools. Ethical approval had to be obtained from the Tasmanian Education Department just to approach the Principals of the public schools and ask for volunteers to complete a data gathering questionnaire.
- 3 As Monash University was where I was studying ethical approval had to be sought from there too. This entailed gaining ethical approval for Existing Data to cover me undertaking the file audit. A second separate approval had to be sought for obtaining data from the non-clinical group of students.

Now imagine you're a student who has limited knowledge of the processes involved in gaining multiple ethical approvals (but are learning VERY quickly!). You do not have immediate access to your supervisor or the various ethics committee's, and you have lots of forms to fill out and consent forms, questionnaires, information sheets etc to design. The whole task is becoming bigger than Ben Hur and the road appears to have more pot-holes in it than you can imagine. Without access to modern technology and emails and telephone conferences this part of the journey may have taken longer than it did!

The process of gaining approval from the University of Tasmania took twelve months and involved emails going backwards and forwards between me, my supervisor, the administrative person for the Tasmanian HREC and the ethical committee itself. Imagine - this part of the journey was happening within the same state I live in! At one stage I was asked to attend an ethics committee meeting in Launceston to clarify



some points and when I thought I had responded and changed everything as requested, something new would emerge that required clarification or changing, therefore extending the process further.

The next stage of my journey was two-fold. I needed to gain approval from the Tasmanian Department of Education and begin the process of applying for approval from Monash University. The Department of Education approval took the shortest time to receive as the decision to permit me to apply for volunteers for data collection is up to each school Principal. Monash University have given me approval to commence the file audit part of my data collection. Luckily this pot-hole was not too deep to transverse. I have commenced this aspect of my research. However, there are ongoing negotiations centred on the questionnaire for students. This is 2.5 years after my initial application for ethical approval.

Asking students aged 12 to 18 questions about self-harm and their family structure is delicate and can have serious repercussions for all concerned. Understandably, the ethics committee wishes to ensure that the students remain safe, and the study can stand up to strong scrutiny and is ethically sound. As I stand here part of me is thinking of the student questionnaire that is causing consternation at this time and wondering what I can do to meet ethical requirements without compromising my research. This pothole feels more like it is a very deep hole and there are currently no footholds to climb out of it. I'm sure all researchers reach this point at least several times in their careers but when you live and work in a rural area, and you study by Distance Education because you have no other choice, sometimes the road feels very long, very lonely and very winding.

My journey goes on

So, after 2.5 years ethical approval is still being sought for one questionnaire required for data collection. Compromises will need to be made, but the integrity of the study must remain valid. This research has the possibility of becoming a major contributor to the study of self-harm behaviours and why they occur. I hope this study's findings may eventually aid clinicians in their therapeutic approach to assisting these troubled young people. I aim to continue the journey and reach the end of the road – and the road may just meander on to further research. Who knows?

Whilst some students deliberately chose to move from home to study not everyone has that choice. This is especially applicable to those of us who live and work in rural areas. Even with modern technology rural and Distance Education students do not have the same access to supervision and resources that internal students have. However this should not prevent anyone from undertaking research within rural areas. It just means things move a little more slowly, you learn how to utilise the research system more effectively, you utilise supervisory knowledge and support efficiently, and become an expert on how to work independently.

For me, what started out as a Masters programme is now a research PhD. I have two terrific internal supervisors at Monash and one external supervisor within my work-place. And I guess having an 'excuse' to travel to Melbourne for study purposes is not such a bad thing when you think of the shops and restaurants. I am also very lucky to have a supportive husband who tells anyone who will listen about my journey and where I am on that journey currently.

References

- 1 Demuth S, Brown SL. Family structure, family processes and adolescent delinquency: The significance of parental absence versus parental gender. *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*. 2004. 41(1); 58-81.
- 2 McAllister M. Multiple meanings of self-harm. University of Tasmania. December 2005.
- 3 Ponnet K, Vermeiren R, Jaspers I, Mussche B, Ruchkin V, Schwab-Stone M, Deboutte D. Suicidal behaviour in adolescents: associations with parental marital status and perceived parent-adolescent relationship. *Journal of Affective Disorders*. 2005. 89. 107-113.
- 4 Bowlby J. *A secure base*. New York. Basic Books. 1988.
- 5 Hughes D. *Facilitating developmental attachment: the road to emotional recovery and behavioural change in foster and adopted children*. Maryland. Aronson. 1997.
- 6 Waters E, Crowell J, Elliott M, Corcoran D, Treboux D. Bowlby's secure base theory and the social/personality psychology of attachment styles. *Attachment & Human Development*. 2002. 4. 230-242.
- 7 Hawton K, Haw C, Houston K, Townsend E. Family history of suicidal behaviour: prevalence and significance in deliberate self-harm patients. *Acta Psychiatrica Scandinavica*. 2002. 106(5). 387-393.



- 8 Hawton K, Rodham K, Evans E, Weatherall R. Deliberate self-harm in adolescents: self report survey in schools in England. *BMJ*. 2002. 325(7374). 1207-1212.
- 9 Hawton K, Rodham K, Evans E. *By their own young hand: deliberate self-harm and suicidal ideas in adolescents*. London. Jessica Kingsley. 2006.
- 10 Young R, van Beinum M, Sweeting H, West P. Young people who self-harm. *BJP*. 2007. 191. 44-49.

Presenter

Anne Beeching-Steen lives and works in Burnie Tasmania at the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service. She works with children aged 0–18 who present with serious developmental and mental health issues. Her work includes assessments, case-management utilising therapeutic interventions including CBT, DBT, Play Therapy and Attachment Therapy. Anne is currently enrolled in a Master of Psychology (Counselling) as a Distance Education Student and is completing her Research Thesis. She wishes to continue her study and complete a Clinical PhD.

