



# Experiments in Field Practicum: An Indian model of living-learning Rural camp for Transformative learning in Social work Education

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## Abstract

*This article is exploring one of the field practicum model conducted in India called rural camp. This community based living-learning field practicum model, is explored from a transformative learning theory in this article. Rural camp is one of the special programs of indigenization of social work education with specific focus on training macro practice in India. While the article explores rural camps features and challenges, it narrates model of social work living-learning field practicum model to social work education.*

**Keywords:** Field Practicum, rural camp, indigenization, macro practice, living-learning field practicum model, transformative learning theory.

## Introduction

The process of developing and implementing indigenized social work theories and models for practice is sturdily required in the developing countries. Though there are lots of efforts happened after the postcolonial period to develop indigenized social work education and practice<sup>1, 2</sup>, these efforts are in its infancy. Developing social work concepts, theories, and models for education and practice should be rooted in a cultural context of the land. The Council on Social Work Education's (CSWE) Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) of the United States, states that, "The purpose of the social work profession is to promote human and community well-being. Guided by a person and environment construct, a global perspective, respect for human diversity, and knowledge based on scientific inquiry, social work's purpose is actualized through its quest for social and economic justice, the prevention of conditions that limit human rights, the elimination of poverty, and the enhancement of the quality of life for all persons<sup>3</sup>. Here the importance of 'person and the environment construct' is vital and brings into light the indispensable role of culture in social work education.

Defining culture is intriguing and complicated in the rapidly changing world of globalization. Banks, Banks, and McGee<sup>4</sup>, define culture as "Most social scientists' today view culture as consisting primarily of the symbolic, ideational, and intangible aspects of human societies. The essence of a culture is not its artifacts, tools, or other tangible cultural elements, but how the members of the group interpret, use, and perceive them. It is the values, symbols, interpretations, and perspectives that distinguish one people from another in modernized societies; it is not material objects and other tangible aspects of human

societies. People within a culture usually interpret the meaning of symbols, artifacts, and behaviors in the same or in similar ways." These similarities in interpretation bring a certain level of uniqueness to a specific community living within a geographical location. The question then arises as to whether or not this uniqueness influences the researchers' interpretation of other cultures without knowing much about them. In social work education, ignorance regarding the influence of existing cultures on human behavior will likely mislead students' interpretation of people from different cultures. This article will evaluate and discuss about social work field practicum method called rural camp that is widely used as a field practicum for macro practice in India. The article will also narrate about the cultural diversity of India and will explore how rural camp tries to bring a paradigm shift among social work students regarding 'how to interpret, use, and perceive a different culture by living among the people for a limited period of time.

## Indigenization of social work education

Influence of western social work profession is quite evident in the Social Work education of developing countries<sup>5-8</sup>. Because of this influence, there is a predominant debate on 'how the social work students are imparted through social work education?<sup>9</sup>. Ejaz<sup>9</sup> also suggests that because social work education is highly influenced by the western culture (particularly British and USA), it is not culturally, politically, and economically appropriate for meeting the needs of developing countries. The developing countries are experiencing a dichotomy of the influence of colonialism, modernization, and industrialization on one side with traditional customs, values, and beliefs on the other<sup>10</sup>. These contrasting ideologies result in a cultural conflict when western theoretical

models are applied to social work practice in developing countries<sup>9</sup>.

The literature addresses two avenues of influence on indigenous social work: one stems from developing countries in Africa, Asia, and South America while other has its roots in westernized countries, like the USA, Canada and Australia<sup>11</sup>. Regardless, significant discussions about indigenization in the developing countries have been neglected in social work literature in the past decades<sup>1,2,9,12-16</sup>. The implications of adapting of westernized social work knowledge in developing countries have been a matter of discussion for quite some time.

In a study conducted by Roan<sup>17</sup>, Taiwanese students were found struggling to fit their social work practice into western theories they had taught. She also believed that this could be the real base of conflict and confusion in issues of social work practice in countries like Taiwan and India. It is quite relevant when Jinchao<sup>18</sup> stated, "What social work in Chinese culture aims to achieve is a state of harmony and integration, rather than the provision of opportunities for one's development and actualization, as emphasized in the west. Wang<sup>19</sup> highlights that "social development and poverty alleviation should be the primary focus of social work education in China and that individualized practice should only constitute a supplementary and secondary role in the social work curriculum. China has since developed its own culturally relevant models of social work education.

The adaptation of social work's values from a westernized perspective to developing countries was based on the belief that social work had universally relevant methodologies and an international professional identity<sup>10</sup>. However, Midgley<sup>10</sup> states that this was a form of 'professional imperialism' imposed by westernized social workers.

Yet again, even with similarities in social work throughout the world, there are differences in the context and content of social worker's roles and approaches in different countries<sup>20</sup>.

## India Outline

India, one of the oldest and greatest civilizations of the world, stretches from the snow covered Himalayas of the north to the tropical rain forest in the south. As the second largest population in the world, India has more than 1.2 billion people living in this seventh largest country in the world<sup>21</sup>. In this vast country lies a mix of various cultures evident by the constitution of India recognizing 22 languages that are prevalent in the country. Additionally, hundreds of dialects add to its multilingual environment. Further, when the nation received its independence from the Britain in 1947, it was comprised of hundreds of princely states, with each having a unique culture and history. Later, following the independence, based on regional languages most of the states were formed. Today, India has 28 states and 7 union territories.

In discussing the factors of cultural divergence in India, religion is a major domain. The majority population of India is Hindus (80.5%), second are Muslims with 13.4% (third largest Islam population in the world), followed by 2.3% of Christians, 1.9% of Sikhs, and various religions like Buddhism, Jainism, Zoroastrianism, and Judaism comprises of the rest of the population<sup>22</sup>. Yet another cultural difference is about the social stratification based on the caste system in India. The caste system has changed significantly in recent years, but has not lost its roots in modern India: Indian politics and the caste system are quite intertwined. This multiplicity in its geography, language, religion, caste, and culture gives India the status as 'a land of diversity'<sup>22</sup>.

India has significant social problems to be addressed as well as individualized problems. India has an alarming rate of poverty (42%) for people living below \$1.25 a day<sup>23</sup>. This converts to 456 million people living below the minimum subsistence level. The minimum subsistence level is the standard set up by the national planning commission where an individual in a rural area needs 2400 calories in a daily diet and 2100 calories for those living in the urban areas. Factors such as housing, health care, clothing, education, and transportation are not taken into account in these poverty estimates. Even though, the school enrollment of children is ninety percent, the adult male literacy rate is 73%, whereas the adult women literacy rate is only 48% and the majority of the Indians (70%) are living in the rural areas<sup>24</sup>.

## Social Work Education and Indigenization in India

While addressing the indigenization of social work education in India, no introductory social work textbook takes into account the elements of social, economic, and political life<sup>25</sup>. While discussing about indigenization, Gray and Coats (2010) states that "A current understanding of 'indigenization' holds that social work knowledge should arise from within the culture, reflect local behaviors, and practices, be interpreted within a local frame of reference and thus be locally relevant, that is, it should address culturally relevant and context-specific problems. It calls for indigenous research that emanates from, adequately represents, and reflects back upon the cultural context in which problems arise." However, Mohan<sup>26</sup> reports that social work developed and practiced in India are inappropriate to address when attempting diversity, unification, and empowerment. On the other hand, Nanavathy<sup>27</sup> found that social workers were able to adapt western concepts and methods in accordance with the culture and needs of the people. Nevertheless, the lack of adapting to the culturally relevant topics in Indian social work education is evident in Indian social work education.

This article evaluates a field practicum model of social work used for macro practice in Kerala, India. The researcher evaluated the student evaluation reports and also the faculty comments about the camp. The reports were evaluated based on

qualitative research methodology using line-by-line coding based in the grounded theory approach. Researcher also used peer debriefing in the process of data analysis and interpretation. Student evaluations were member checked and for data triangulation, both the students as well as instructor evaluative comments were used.

## **Rural Camp**

Under the pertinent situations of cultural diversity and social problems, social work students are given special focus to learn about the predominant social culture through a social living program called 'rural camp'. First semester students' are assigned their field practicum in community settings that are designed to provide direct community experience. The process involves a gradual development under the supervision of a social work professional working in an organization that serves rural communities. Rural camp is a program developed to create firsthand experiences of rural cultures and by exposing students to real life situations in a rural setting. The expectation of rural camp is to give participative, reflective, and analytical learning experiences for the students. This article is based on rural camps conducted in the state of Kerala (India) by the various colleges of social work.

Rural camp is a 10-day living-learning experience designed for the undergraduates as well as for the graduate level, social work students. Selection of the rural campsite is the primary task of the field practicum office. A rural campsite was selected out of different campsites based on the criteria set up by the field work committee. Then the Field Practicum office worked with the local organizations to establish an entry point into the community. Later, students were assigned to design the entire camp experience based on the guidelines found in the field practicum manual.

A typical day in the rural camp starts with physical exercises and includes home visits, socio-economic survey, community participatory activities, and community participatory cultural events and finally ends with students' daily reflection of the learning experience. These activities were designed to ensure a high level of community interaction for the students. Rural camp practicum was intended to emancipate dialectical and dialogical learning for the students, as they are both the subjects and the center of the learning process. Following were the major themes derived from the analysis of the evaluation reports.

## **Transformation of the perceptions**

Building a rapport between the community and the students was found to enrich the learning environment. It was found that student perceptions about people were transformed by the end of the rural camp. In the initial days of the camp students were preoccupied with a biased mindset about rural communities, as they approach the community members. However, as they developed professional relationships, this prejudice receded and

in its place, developed realization of the existence of multiple realities. Additionally, students reflected upon their knowledge, critically analyzed it, and later acted upon it to bring a significant change in their perception about the rural people: this in turn was found to be the praxis as mentioned by Freire<sup>16</sup>.

## **Existence of an educational dichotomy**

Initially when students ventured into a rural community they found that a dichotomy existed between college students who were educated and contrasted that with the local people who were less educated. When the students and the community come into a dialogical interaction, there was a significant change in the dichotomy. Students, as well as the community members began to work towards mutually benefiting one another in rural camp.

## **Faculty supervision**

Faculty supervisors were there to guide the students on all the ten days of the camp. However, supervising the students in the rural camp is a challenge for the faculty. Faculty supervision was developed in a manner that students are provided with opportunities to learn from their experiences. Learning becomes an outcome of their knowing about people and their culture in the rural settings. Faculty guidance was designed to support learning dialoging with local people, community leaders, and by assessing community needs, understanding the power structures, and exploring community resources. Faculty provides students with guidance to reflect on what they learned in the classroom setting and how it can be integrated into real world experiences.

## **Challenges**

Rural camp exposes students to rural amenities and provides them with an opportunity to learn and understand rural customs and culture. Nevertheless, organizing such an experience requires pragmatic precautions from the field practicum office. The primary and foremost concern is that of the safety and security of the students. To ensure safety and security of the students the field practicum faculties developed a strong collaboration with the local stake holders as well as and the police where the camp was located. Before finalizing the location, the field practicum faculties made multiple visits and conducted various discussions with community people and leaders to ensure that the learning environment was safe for the students. Ultimately, the campsite was selected when the field practicum office felt safe to send students.

The second important challenge was protecting people in the rural area. Protection is used here in a wider sense, representing protection of their values, beliefs, culture, life style, and identity. Individuals' and communities' self-dignity and worth were protected while students completed their projects. To ensure this goal, the students of Social Work were provided an orientation before rural camp. They were directed to value and

respect the people and their culture. The third challenge was the level of skills and knowledge of the accompanying faculty members. The faculty/faculties who were assigned for the camp were also trained to work with rural population. The rural camp faculties collaborated with professional social work organizations established in rural areas to assist in providing practicum supervision.

## Rural Camp and Transformative Learning Theory

Rural camp provided a platform for the students to think critically about their core assumptions and inferences that they make about different cultures and how their 'worldly view' about other cultures is influenced their perceptions biased assumptions. This awareness was achieved while social work students critically examine their worldview when negotiating and acting on their individualized purposes, values, feelings, and meanings when contrasted with those learned in an uncritically assimilated form<sup>28</sup>. During the camp, decisions were examined from a more critical perspective resulting in students' constructing revised and new interpretations of the meaning of social realities<sup>29</sup>. As one of the students observed,

*"I never knew a rural community before at this level. I was under the impression that I know everything about the rural people, but now my views have to be changed. I knew very little about them."*

This deconstruction and reinterpretation of meanings is critical towards one's professional development. This transformative learning, grounded in human communication, can only be understood through the process of interaction and critical examination that leads to the construction of a revised or a new interpretation of meaning that, in turn, guide future action<sup>30</sup>. This is evident when student commented,

*"My earlier notion was that rural people are ignorant and stubborn to change and that what makes them poor. But by interacting with the people these number of days, I have to correct my existing belief and now I would say that they are knowledgeable, they have a very strong outlook about change and they are open to change, but the social and political system under which they live restricts them from rising out of their poverty"*.

As purported by transformative learning theory, one's frame of reference creates and constraints the process of transformation. "Frames of reference are structures of assumptions and expectations that frame an individual's tacit points of view and influences their thinking, beliefs, and actions"<sup>29</sup>. Students found that their earlier beliefs about the rural people were influenced by the culture they lived in. Feedback from the students who attended the camp highlighted the need for political action and policy change to improve the conditions of people in the rural communities. Through the process of living, learning, and

reflecting while attending rural camp, the frame of reference of social work students' were revised. Their rural experience created a paradigm shift. This paradigm shift leads to "a more fully developed frame of reference...that one is more i. inclusive, ii. differentiating, iii. permeable, iv. critically reflective, and v. integrative of experience"<sup>30</sup>.

During the 10-day rural camp, students learned that their interaction with the community was vital to their learning process. They believed themselves to be more empowered, educated, and accepting. This was evident when one student said,

*"I learned a lot from the camp. I feel more confident in working with rural people because I learned about them. I was not that receptive to their life style in the beginning, but after coming to deeply know them, I can understand them and accept them as they are."*

Additionally, students' reflections on the learning process were significant and effective. Another student remarked,

*"I think I learned much more here in the camp than I learned about the rural people in the class. This was a very good experience for me."*

Another student commented along the same lines,

*"As a student of social work, I think we should be getting more exposure like this while we are in the program. I have acquired a lot more information and knowledge in this camp than I learned in the books."*

While the above-mentioned experiences of students are far more immediate responses, the effect of this knowledge was seen while they were placed in their respective community field practicum in their first semester. In their second year of training, attitudinal changes that took place in rural camp had a wider impact. As one of the faculty remarked,

*"I had attended rural camp while I was a student and again as a faculty member, I can say that this is one of the most effective methods of bringing social work attitude change among students, who are coming into the social work program from various disciplines."*

Another faculty stated,

*"I can surely say that rural camp has a tremendous influence on the attitudes of the students towards various social problems. After rural camp, they are more responsive, reflective and effective in all of their field practicum placements."*

Students' discourses with the rural people might have generated a questioning of the existing beliefs that are deeply held by the

students and this process might have helped them to be transformed into being more realistic in their worldview.

## Conclusion

Despite the fact that rural camp was said to be one of the effective methods to generate reflective thought to bring about attitudinal change or developing a more realistic social work attitude, we have to be concerned about the practicality of this method of field practicum in other countries. The practicality of this method is of the discretion of the field practicum faculty and goals of the program and ought to be based on their knowledge of the prevailing culture of the specific locality. As an experiment in field practicum curriculum, rural camp could be replicated in various practice fields or in a study abroad program. Even though it is of limited time duration, it gives more specific and direct learning through living the experience of rural people. Furthermore, research into exploring the effectiveness of rural camps and 'onsite community learning experiences' will enhance the theoretical foundation as well as practical knowledge base in the area.

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