

## **Doing Mental Health Research: Challenges and Opportunities**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Mental Health being a public health concern affects various populations globally, which draws more attention from health professionals and scholars. Doing mental health research requires preparations, ethical considerations, and processes to protect both the researcher and the participants, and at the same time, fully achieve the set objectives in a research agenda. There are several challenges and opportunities that may be observed when doing mental health research.

In this commentary, we will discuss challenges and opportunities based on our experiences in the mental health project that we have been doing in a university in Manila, Philippines. The main goal of our research project is to identify the socio-cultural contexts that exacerbate the vulnerability of students who are experiencing mental health issues and struggling with their daily lives. As part of the data collection of the research project, a total of 60 interviews with university college students, who are suffering from mental health illness, have been conducted.

There are two major challenges in conducting this mental health research, which may affect the participants and the researcher. One main challenge is collecting data from students who have been struggling with mental illness. These university students have a high prevalence of mental illness-related triggers, struggles, and episodes, which necessitate good rapport building and therapeutic communication skills.

Second, ensuring that our mental health and well-being would not be compromised, especially after the interview sessions with our participants. Here, we would like to bring in the concept of "compassion fatigue," which we might have experienced due to the repeated exposure to stressful and traumatic narratives from the participants. Scholarly articles on compassion fatigue and mental health are mostly limited to the narratives and experiences of professional health care providers. Zhang et.al. (2021) explored compassion fatigue and counselor's self-efficacy in doing mental health interventions, which revealed the importance of self-oriented empathy and its power to influence compassion fatigue, depending negatively or positively on the counselor's level of mindfulness. Another study on compassion fatigue among mental healthcare providers and the impact on their overall well-being was written by Patel (2018). There is a dearth of studies focusing on compassion fatigue experienced by researchers conducting mental health studies. We would just like to highlight the importance of studies that could also help mental health researchers who might have been experiencing compassion fatigue in order to ensure both the quality of lives of the researchers and the results of the studies.

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Clear positionality of the researchers must also be considered in doing mental health research. Positionality may affect the engagement of researchers in the research process, including their engagement with the participants, data analysis and communication of findings (Shaw et al., 2019). Positionality concerns the way researchers perceive their roles, limitations, and boundaries in doing sensitive research topics. It is important to know that one may encounter emotional challenges, and not all researchers may have enough resilience in dealing with these difficulties. Therefore, it is important that adequate support must be provided to researchers to cope with these emotional demands and challenges (Fenge et al., 2019). As such, this support mechanism shall be integrated at the beginning of the research and in its research design (Mallon & Elliott, 2019). Conducting sensitive research, such as the lived experience of university students with mental health conditions, may expose researchers to heightened negative emotions through their direct interaction with the students. We were exposed to various negative experiences reported by students, which contributed to the student's current mental health status. These experiences may involve physical, mental, and sexual abuse, which may be distressing for students as well as the researchers.

Based on the study conducted by Melville and Hincks (2016), researchers' frequent exposure to stories of other people's trauma may negatively impact the mental health of researchers, which may include distress, anxiety, and depression. In our case, we did not experience any form of distress, but we felt the need to release our emotions by crying. These experiences are not only prevalent in the interviewers, as the transcribers and coders have also experienced similar negative emotions due to the repeated listening and reading of students' narratives. According to Rager (2005), a transcriber reported emotional distress that caused episodes of crying and an immediate break from the research. To prevent any further distress among the researchers, we partnered with a mental health professional who provided us with an interactive learning discussion session. This session allowed all the researchers and staff to give vent to their feelings and emotions from the narratives of the students with mental illnesses. The professional expert also processed our emotions and concerns, and at the same time, we were provided with strategies on how to handle our post research situations and circumstances. Therefore, we recommend that their scholarly articles and studies must also explore the different interventions, which might be helpful for the mental health and well-being of their fellow researchers. The research initiatives and advocacies of mental health professionals should be geared towards addressing the current needs and situations concerning the mental health of individuals, families, and even communities.

In doing this mental health research, there were times that we also questioned whether our emotions were still valid or if these were already affecting our positionality as researchers. Several times during the study, researchers have been exposed to the negative conditions of the students even though they have the desire to assist the participants while still maintaining the confidentiality of the students' identity. Coles et al. (2014) investigated sexual violence, which showed that while the researcher's role is different from the counselor, it could be "more traumatizing because of the inability to help the victim". Especially in mental health studies, researchers have a high possibility of encountering narratives of past abuse or even ongoing abuse being experienced by the interviewee. Surmiak (2019) explored the opinions of qualitative researchers with vulnerable participants on maintaining or breaking confidentiality concerning criminal activities and harm. Some researchers in that study maintained or observed the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants, especially in the case of the dearth of proof of accusing innocent people. In the end, we reminded ourselves to be clear in our positionality in doing this mental health research. A researcher must keep an "empathic distance" from their participants to avoid compromising the facilitation of the research and to ensure the achievement of study's goals (Valentine, 2007).

In these circumstances, the role of the ethics committee may be extended to the researchers, especially when the research is sensitive and might cause harm, not only to the participants, but also to the researchers. Systematic monitoring of researchers' well-being is suggested by Milburn and Newall (2013) to provide assistance when needed and to create a supportive setting within the research team. The preparation of the research team is critical in the process. According to Rager (2005), every researcher taking part in the study should be prepared and should have a strategy for their own self-care, especially if they experience significant emotional reactions to the study.

Despite the challenges faced, there have been several opportunities that were identified in conducting this mental health research. This mental health research served as an opportunity for students with mental health concerns to voice out and validate their mental health experiences and needs. This resonates with other research studies, which highlight that sensitive research topics may bring advantages, such as “healing, giving voice, and empowerment” (Dickson-Swift et al., 2008, as cited in Shalke, 2018; Gibert, 2001, as cited in Rager, 2005). Participants voiced out their relief as they opened their stories to us:

“Thank you so much for this opportunity. Thank you of making the [a] safe space for me, and for making me feel comfortable. Thank you very much”.

“I would like to say thank you because this is really helpful. Im hopeful for [of] this project. I really hope this would be able to help a lot of people”.

Disclosing their situations and experiences to researchers who are not related to the participants provided them a sense of acceptance despite the presence of mental health concerns. In doing this mental health study, we realized that the data collection provided the college students a "secure space", which helped validate their situations and feelings. Mental space is conceptualized as, "how the students imagine themselves, including conceptualizations of their past, present, and future selves and potentially fantastic alternative visions that provide escapes from everyday experience, perhaps to retreat from pain or find strength in dreams" (Gordon et al., 2000, p. 19, as cited in Rosvall, 2019). In our research experience, we would like to add the concept of "secure space," which refers to how exactly the students would like others to respond to their situations and experiences. The secure space is characterized by the act of active listening where most of the time is given to the students just to share their mental health conditions, realities, and experiences.

Another opportunity brought about by doing mental health research is the generation of practical recommendations in addressing mental health gaps and issues within schools and among university college students. The narratives of the college students are useful evidence in developing and improving better mental health programs and services that are tailored fit to their current situations and needs. In addition to this, programs and interventions for mental health researchers who encounter challenges may also be recommended. Although, according to Gutherie et al. (2018) on their study on understanding mental health in the research environment, limited evidence on the prevalence of mental health illnesses and conditions among researchers have been published. While we agree with this, we still recognize the circumstances and emotions we have experienced after conducting the research on mental health among college students. These circumstances could have been worse for others, which may lead to more serious mental illnesses and conditions. Therefore, we recommend that much attention must also be given to the needs and experiences of researchers who are doing mental health-related research.

With the opportunities and challenges we presented, we recommend that the policies related to mental health be revisited to address the challenges we raised above, and at the same time, utilize the opportunities to further improve the mental health and well-being of students. The Mental Health Law, also known as Republic Act 11036: An Act Establishing a National Mental Health Policy for the Purpose of Enhancing the Delivery of Integrated Mental Health Services, Promoting and Protecting the Rights of Persons Utilizing Psychiatric, Neurologic, and Psychosocial Health Services, Appropriating Funds Therefore, and for Other Purposes, was enacted in 2018. The law is remarkable because it emphasizes the holistic and whole-of-society approach to mental health promotion and treatment. However, based on the students' interviews, challenges such as access to prescription in provinces, availability of specialists, high cost of treatments, and lack of information about local governments' mental health programs and services persist.

While the law has a section dedicated to research and development, its primary concern is the protection of the participant. The researcher was mentioned, but only about the technicalities of the research implementation:

“High ethical standards in mental health research shall be promoted to ensure that research is conducted only with the free and informed consent of the persons involved: researchers do not receive any privileges, compensation or remuneration in exchange for encouraging or recruiting participants; potentially harmful or dangerous research is not undertaken all research us approved by an independent ethics committee, in accordance with the applicable law”. (Republic Act 11036)

While we recognize the efforts of policy makers in approving the mental health act of the Philippines, it is recommended that the protection of the researchers and other stakeholders be integrated in the law, given the opportunities and development it could bring in addressing and bridging the gaps related to mental health research. The importance of research is also shown in formulating the National Mental Health Research Agenda (NMHRA). The agenda presents the reach priority from 2019 to 2022, and even beyond five years, with three outcomes: (1) improved mental health information system; (2) strengthened leadership and governance; and (3) accessible, affordable, responsive and holistic mental health services.

In this commentary, we examined the challenges and opportunities associated with conducting mental health research among university students in the Philippines. With the increasing number of individuals suffering from mental health conditions, particularly among young people, now more than ever, addressing mental health is crucial. Responsive and appropriate intervention to increase mental health awareness and to enhance mental health services requires evidence-based information. These data will be obtained only after extensive investigation with a person with a mental health issue and other stakeholders. The Mental Health Law acknowledged the significance of mental health research, and it is included in various sections of the law.

It is important that the protection of all participants be considered in doing mental health research. In addition to the participant, the research team must be safeguarded. Apart from technical preparations, the research team must prepare themselves for the significant emotions displayed by participants, colleagues, and even oneself. We have also discussed several strategies in this research, such as positionality and how the researchers were supported by giving access to professionals to ensure the team's mental health was not compromised.

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