

CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

4.1 Research design

According to De Vos (2002) there are two broad approaches that can be followed when conducting research, namely, qualitative and quantitative research methods. Neuman (1995) indicates that a qualitative research method focuses on constructing social reality and events, uses few subjects and thematic analysis. On the other hand, quantitative research method focuses on subjective facts, uses many subjects and statistical analysis (Neuman, 1995). The study is quantitative in approach and the design used is descriptive. However the study included some qualitative aspects in the data collection.

The quantitative part of the study included the gathering of subjective facts by using mainly closed-ended questions. The qualitative part of the study utilised thematic development through using open-ended questions. The quantitative and qualitative descriptive approaches were relevant research designs as it allowed perceptions of occupational social workers to be gathered and the relationship between management and workers to be explored. Also, the researcher had an opportunity to assess the perceptions of occupational social workers about the relationship between themselves and management.

4.2 Sampling

“Sampling can be regarded as an element of measurement drawn from the population in which the researcher is interested” (Grinnell, 1993: 157). In terms of this study, the population in which the researcher was interested was occupational social workers in Gauteng province, South Africa. It is clear that not all potential respondents can participate in the study given efficiency, time constraints and financial resources as reasons outlined by Grinnell (1993).

Various writers such as Neuman (1995), Grinnell (1993) and De Vos (1998) have identified probability and non probability sampling as two types of sampling procedures. According to Seaberg (1988) cited in De Vos (1998:195) probability sampling is “the sample in which each potential respondent in the population has a same known probability of being selected.” In a general sense, a non probability sampling is a sample in which each person in the population does not have a same known probability of being selected (De Vos, 1998).

Even though the researcher obtained a list of previous Masters’ students from the University of the Witwatersrand, School of Social Work and list of employee assistance practitioners from the Gauteng EAP Association, the list was not accurate and did not include all occupational social workers in Gauteng province. Some of the names of the potential respondents listed could not be reached because they had changed employment or telephone contact numbers. As the researcher did not have an accurate list, not every occupational social worker had an equal chance of being chosen as part of the sample. Thus, the sample was stratified and purposively selected initially.

Non probability sampling, specifically snowballing was chosen at a later stage for the purpose of this study because the researcher was unable to find an adequate number of participants. That meant that respondents who were identified referred the researcher to other potential respondents as described by Neuman (1995). It was relevant because it allowed the researcher to access as many respondents as possible. Secondly, the chosen sampling procedure increased the chances of the researcher getting a good response to the study. From the population that the researcher identified, criteria for participation in the study included being a qualified social worker and having practiced social work for at least six months in their present position as an occupational social worker. The six month time frame was chosen with an assumption that the respondents would have settled in their jobs and would have gained a reasonable understanding of how their organisations operate.

The researcher had intended interviewing thirty respondents but had access to only twenty seven. There were to be five respondents from each of the following six sectors: government departments, manufacturing, para-statal, military, finance and mining. The inclusion criteria for the various sectors were, 1) sectors should have occupational social workers employed, 2) sectors and their employees should have had no prior contact with the researcher and 3) the researcher was to have had no prior knowledge about details of the occupational social work services and sectors.

The sampling started with brainstorming and listing various sectors employing social workers, identifying occupational social workers and assessing which sectors they fit in. The main purpose was to get the perceptions of respondents representing more than one sector. The researcher contacted occupational social workers and employee assistance practitioners on the list and enquired whether they knew of any other colleagues in the sector in which they were working. In this way, the researcher followed up on referrals in each of the sectors until she had the required number of respondents.

The mining sector could not be included due to geographic inaccessibility to the researcher (North West Province). As a result, five sectors were included and only twenty seven respondents took part in the study as opposed to thirty. This study was limited geographically to Gauteng Province. The sectors are not the only sectors that employ occupational social workers however the researcher found that most of potential respondents were employed in these sectors. Secondly, the perceptions and experiences were to be drawn from various settings in order to give enough insight to the findings on the study. Respondents were contacted telephonically and given a brief description of the study and informed that the consent letter was to be signed. The information was faxed to the potential respondents. Appointments were set up with potential respondents who were available and interested to take part.

4.3 Research tool

An interview schedule based on the aims of the study, past research studies and Du Plessis's (1994) six principles was developed by the researcher (See Appendix B: Interview Schedule). The schedule was designed to guide the face to face individual interviews. The questions were to be asked verbally and responses were to be noted by the researcher. The use of an interview schedule was chosen for various reasons. Firstly, it gave the researcher an opportunity to probe for more information where necessary. Furthermore, it allowed respondents to ask for clarity if they did not understand and more thoughtful and participative answers could be elicited from the respondents. According to Goldstein (1980), respondents are motivated to answer all the questions if they understand what is expected of them. On the other hand, the researcher supports Neuman's (1995) argument that the researcher's presence might influence the way the respondents answer the questions.

The research tool consisted of both open and close-ended questions. The open-ended questions were chosen to capture the experiences and views of the respondents while giving the researcher the opportunity to probe for more information. The closed questions were used when requiring yes or no answers and chosen to assist with more straight forward data processing and analysis. The interview schedule consisted of various sections based on aims of the study and a study done by Du Plessis (1994) which included nine principles that would assist occupational social workers move from micro to macro practice. Out of nine principles, six were used to guide the construction of questions in a research tool. That was very helpful and made it possible for the researcher to remain focused and ask relevant questions. In this regard the Du Plessis's (1994) study had a great influence in the study.

4.4 Pre-testing

Pre-testing of a measuring tool consists of “trying it out on a small number of persons who have characteristics similar to those of the target group of the respondents” (De Vos, 1998: 179). The research tool was pre-tested on one employee who was not part of the actual sample. The employee was chosen due to similar characteristics to those of the target group as argued by De Vos (2002). Neuman (1995) has indicated that the process of pre-testing helps to identify aspects of the research tool that need refinement. This was the case because pre-testing of the research tool resulted in changes in some terminology used and clarification of some questions, as well as a realisation that the interview would take at least an hour to complete. .

4.5 Data Collection

A semi-structured interview lasting for approximately an hour was used to collect data. All the respondents’ were given a consent form and they gave permission to be interviewed. In order to collect data, the researcher traveled to respondents’ workplaces. Only two respondents traveled to the researcher’s workplace to be interviewed. The data was collected between February and October 2003.

4.6 Data analysis and presentation

“Data analysis is a process by which large sets of data are reduced to smaller sets to make sense out of the data collected” (Mark, 1998: 318). This process was done in two ways because of the kind of data collected. Firstly, simple descriptive statistics were used to analyse data collected from closed ended questions. The more qualitative data was scrutinised for common responses and these were analysed to identify core themes. The themes were further analysed according to the aims of the study. The procedure was adopted in order to link the data obtained with the aims of the study. Data was presented both qualitatively through discussion and quantitatively in the form of tables and figures.