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# **UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN**

## **Faculty of Humanities**

Department of Social Development

2011

### **Final Year Social Work Students at the University of Cape Town: Perceptions of key experiences and motivations that influenced their subsequent decision to study Social Work.**

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RWLBRI003

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements

For the award of the degree of

Master of Social Science in Clinical Social Work Practice.

This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works of other people has been attributed, cited and referenced.

**Supervisor: Fatima Williams**

**December 2011**

## ABSTRACT

This study set out to explore whether a connection exists between the social work students' perceptions of their childhoods and their pursuit of the profession of social work. The benefits acquired by the students through the process of their studies were also explored. Finally the study examined the students' experience of the social work course investigating if there was sufficient support for them and if the curriculum met their needs as far as personal growth, skills, knowledge and personal healing are concerned.

The research was conducted at the University of Cape Town and a qualitative research design used. Purposive sampling was employed and twenty final year students were interviewed using a semi structured interview schedule.

The findings revealed that most of the participants had childhoods that were diverse in that they were happy, carefree and alternately sad and lonely. The emotions connected to the participants' childhoods included them feeling excited and safe as well as having feelings of shame and anger. Many of the participants lived through negative events and experiences such as divorce, death of a family member and poverty. The participants were motivated to pursue social work because of their strong feelings of altruism, their spiritual belief system, influence of significant family members and specific events in their childhoods. The findings also revealed that the majority of participants experienced incredible personal growth through the study of social work and that they had in retrospect entered into social work in order to access personal healing.

Recommendations to the Faculty of Humanities, the Department of Social Development and the University of Cape Town include the formation of small group workshops. It would prove to be beneficial if the career guidance department could play a more prominent role during orientation. Recommendations to the Department of Social Development include the scrutiny of the curriculum and the reassessment of lecturer recruitment. Personal supervision or mentoring could further assist students.

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University of Cape Town

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# CHAPTER ONE

## PROBLEM FORMULATION

### 1.1 Introduction

The purpose of this research is to explore and establish if the social work students' childhood, or key aspects thereof, influenced their decision to study social work at the University of Cape Town. A corresponding purpose is to discover if there are other reasons aside from the childhood experiences, for entry into social work. The topic, research questions, research objectives as well as assumptions will be outlined in this chapter. Included in this chapter are clarification of concepts, ethical considerations, a discussion of the reflexivity of the researcher, an outline of the research report and finally concluding remarks will complete this chapter.

### 1.2 Background to the problem

The welfare model inherited from the Apartheid era proved to be inequitable, discriminatory and catering primarily for the white minority. This system consisted of a remedial approach which included institutional care, statutory social work services as well as case work. Access to services was racially based (Patel, 2008).

The creation and implementation of *The South African White Paper for Social Welfare* in 1997 shifted away from Apartheid's social welfare programme and promised to promote reconciliation, reconstruction and development. Policy governing social welfare services had taken on a developmental slant to ensure the inclusion of services to the majority of the population. Two important social programmes notably social security and welfare services were created (Patel, 2008).

This inclusive welfare system soon faced many challenges, namely no policy yet exists to deliver developmental services at local government level and this creates a problem as local government is the closest point of service delivery to people on the ground. The capacity to deliver the services legislated both in terms of human and financial resources remains an enormous challenge. Other challenges remain the high level of poverty as well as HIV/Aids, regional migration from neighbouring states, crime and violence in the communities, low

levels of literacy and education, poor housing and public health, malnutrition, teenage pregnancy and substance abuse are all factors hampering the system to provide according to our new welfare mandate (Patel, 2008; Earle, 2008; Gray, 2000).

In South Africa today there is a dire need for professionally qualified social workers in all spheres of expertise. There are numerous benefits to entering into social work in that mathematics and science are not requirements for the Bachelor of Social Work degree and so many students will be drawn towards the profession for this reason alone (Earle, 2008). Another benefit of the profession is that employment in South Africa in the present circumstances is virtually guaranteed. Other benefits may include flexible and independent work, individual offices and in government employ vehicle subsidies. Putting aside all these benefits the practice of social work in South Africa is complex and challenging owing to the vast increase of the client population, due to the change from the old system to the new and the migration from the rest of Africa which swells the number of people requiring assistance. The escalating social problems in the country have also swamped the social services departments and the HIV/Aids pandemic has strained relations between the department and the NGO sector (Earle, 2008).

Many students especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds are attracted to the profession by the benefits and status enjoyed by the social workers in the communities. However most of the students enter into social work because of a desire to help people or to make a difference in their communities (Earle, 2008). Many students feel that social work for them is a 'calling'. Many professionals however begin social work with an idealisation of altruism but the challenges and resulting disillusionment of the reality of practice in South Africa result in social workers exploring other alternatives such as moving abroad, practicing in the private sector, entering management or education (Earle, 2008; Freeman, 2007; Gray, 2000).

In South Africa the profession of social work is doubly eroded, firstly through the massive dropout from universities and then compounded by the erosion resulting from professional disillusionment and the realities of working in the field (Earle, 2008).

Christie (2009) found the process of learning for a university student to be an emotionally challenging one. There is often little categorical acknowledgement of the social and

emotional components of this process, despite the enormous attrition rate. Academic and emotional support from the academic staff and friends on the course, is crucial for students (Halawah, 2006). The making of friends is essential as this assists with the integration process (Wilcox, Winn & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005). Peers can be instrumental in the circulation of knowledge and skills to each other and this support is critical to overall success at university (Skryme, 2007). This support is even more vital for social work students who deal not only with the academic challenges but also with the emotional challenges of field practice. Palmer, O’Kane and Ownens (2009) found in their research that students who studied in groups formed a support for one another and helped each other through difficult times.

Lecturers play an important part in students’ lives. The students’ interactions with lecturers have a positive relationship with personal development, as well as with academic achievement (Meyer, Spencer & French, 2009). Students’ relationships with faculty members establish an important part of their integration and continuity of academic life (Wilcox, Winn & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005).

For these reasons it is vital that the University of Cape Town (UCT) is fully aware of the needs of the students as they enter into their studies in order to meet these needs as comprehensively as possible so that erosion from the social work programme can be minimised.

### **1.3 Rationale**

Students enter university and social work in particular for a variety of reasons as well as to satisfy various personal needs. Some students may enter into social work due to the influence of significant others. Other students go into social work because they have the required entry points and register for social work because it sounds like a ‘relatively easy’ and pleasant degree to do. Many students presently are able to access bursaries and enter into the study of social work through this channel. Chances are, if they had a choice, they might decide to study another degree that is more aligned with their real interests and passions (Earle, 2008).

Many students enter into social work because they are genuinely altruistic and have a desire to help and care for humanity. A possible reason for the studying of social work could also

be related to the student's spiritual beliefs and the feeling that they are guided by their higher power to engage in compassionate work and so choose social work to meet this need (Earle, 2008; Patel, 2008; Russel 1998).

Whether a family is traditional, adaptive, innovative or maladapted, chaotic or organised, it attempts to arrange itself into a functional unit says Goldenberg and Goldenberg (2008). Every family impacts on its members and this impact be it positive or negative, may encourage a student to enter into the helping profession of social work.

This research aims to explore the variety of reasons or needs that prompted the student to enter into the social work arena. This format of research is important to the university in its planning of the numerous programmes it offers. The academic format and the structure of the programmes need to meet the needs of the students otherwise there will continue to be significant attrition from within the Department of Social Development. It is vital for UCT to match the needs and motivations for students' entry with the structure and format of the social work curriculum. If the university is aware of the current needs of the student body, the appropriate structures, courses and support can be put into place to meet the need of the students. The research findings will be made available to the Faculty of Humanities (Department of Social Development) at the University of Cape Town and should offer valuable insight into the needs of the students and their requirements as they move through university.

## **1.4 Topic**

**Final year social work students at the University of Cape Town: Perception of key experiences and motivations that influenced their subsequent decision to study social work.**

## **1.5 Research questions**

1. What experiences characterised the students' childhood?
2. What three defining experiences influenced the students' childhood and possible entry into social work?
3. What other needs, experiences or motivations influenced the students' entry into social work at UCT?

4. What are the benefits of studying social work with regards to their personal development?
5. How is the UCT environment, as well as the theory courses and field practice meeting the needs of the students?

## 1.6 Research Objectives

1. To investigate the students' experience of their childhood.
2. To explore three defining childhood experiences that impacted the students and which possibly influenced their choice of social work as a profession.
3. To ascertain if any other life experiences, needs or motivations influenced the students' desire to study social work.
4. To determine if the students have experienced any covert or overt benefits with regards to personal growth.
5. To ascertain whether the students' expectations of university have been met.

## 1.7 Research assumption

The main assumption of this research is that students enter into the study of social work for a variety of reasons and needs other than society's assumption that students have a desire to help individuals or communities in distress. The assumption is that altruism is not the entire and sole motive for entry into social work. The researcher is of the opinion that a variety of other reasons or needs are involved in the choice of social work as a profession.

Due to the fact that students do not necessarily choose social work out of altruism alone, if the original conscious or unconscious needs are not addressed, the students may leave UCT prematurely, resulting in a decrease in the number of qualified social workers.

## 1.8 Concept clarification

**Student.** A person engaged in studying something, a pupil at a university, college etc (The Oxford English Dictionary, 1994).

**Experiences.** Knowledge derived from one's own action, practice, perception, enjoyment or suffering; experimental knowledge. Every form of knowledge due to one's immediate observation (Webster Comprehensive Dictionary, 1995).

**Social work.** Social work practice consists of the professional application of social work values, principles and techniques to the following ends: helping people obtain vital resources and services; providing counselling and psychotherapy for individuals, families and groups; helping communities to access social and health services and participating in the relevant legislative processes (van Dyk, 2000).

**Perception.** The process of becoming aware or conscious of a thing or things in general; the state of being aware, consciousness (spiritual) understanding (The Oxford English Dictionary, 1994).

**Childhood.** The early stage in the human life cycle, characterised by rapid physical growth and efforts to model adult roles and responsibilities mostly through play and formal education (The Social Work Dictionary, 1995).

## **1.9 Ethical considerations**

When engaged in any research, there are ethical guidelines that should be adhered to. Ethical considerations need to be taken into account because of its association with morality; matters of right and wrong (Babbie and Mouton, 2001).

The following ethical considerations as outlined by De Vos, Strydom, Fouche and Delport (2005) were incorporated in this research:

### **1.9.1 Avoidance of harm to participants**

In the process of an investigation harm can be perpetrated against the participants, either physically or emotionally – in a qualitative report, harm to the participants will be mostly of an emotional nature (De Vos et al, 2005). In order to avoid all harm to the subjects, the researcher was aware of the potential emotions that could be evoked through the questioning process and was cognizant of showing the utmost respect to the participants, respecting their opinions and choices, without judgement. The participants were given the choice to decline answering any questions they felt uncomfortable answering.

### **1.9.2 Informed consent**

Informed consent entails the subjects receiving all the information pertinent to the study and the possible impact of this study so that an informed decision regarding their participation can be made (De Vos et al, 2005). Information imparted to the subjects included the advantages and disadvantages of the study, any dangers that the participants may be subjected to, as well as information regarding the credibility of the researcher and the nature of the research.

### **1.9.3 Voluntary participation**

According to Babbie and Mouton (2001), the subjects of the research have the right to decide whether they want to participate in the research or if they choose to, they can decline. It was vital that the participants in the research did so of their own free will and that there was no coercion. In this research the researcher ensured that all participants were aware that their inclusion was voluntary and if for any reason the subjects changed their minds during the interview, they were free to withdraw from the process.

### **1.9.4 Deception of participants**

If there is deliberate misrepresentation of facts, in order to make the participants believe that which is not true, this is also part and parcel of violating the respect which is due to the participants; this can be considered to be deception of the participants (De Vos et al, 2005). The researcher was aware of the pitfalls pertaining to deception and at all times attempted to make full disclosure with regards to the research. At no time was there misrepresentation of the facts or any form of disrespect shown to the students.

### **1.9.5 Violation of privacy, anonymity and confidentiality**

All the research subjects have the right to decide what they will share, when they will share and where the sharing will take place as well as how the information will be used (De Vos et al, 2005). In this research the participants were assured that their real names would not be used in the study. In the research report all manuscripts were treated with the utmost confidence and whatever the subjects shared was not shared with others or revealed in the

research findings. This confidentiality of information and process was communicated to the participants prior to the interviews.

### **1.9.6 Action and competence of researcher**

Researchers are ethically obligated to ensure that they are competent and adequately skilled to carry out the proposed research (De Vos et al, 2005). In this regard the researcher used her previously learnt skills, training and knowledge in the interview process. The utmost care was taken not to impose the values and beliefs of the researcher on the participant.

### **1.9.7 Debriefing of participants**

Debriefing takes place after the interview session in which the subjects get the opportunity to process the interview questions and their feelings with regards to the process. This process allowed for the researcher to assist participants and minimise harm (De Vos et al, 2005). Any therapeutic need that arose from the interview was dealt with by referring the student to the appropriate resources.

### **1.9.8 Reporting of findings**

The researcher has an obligation to report the findings of the research in a scientific manner without manipulation of the findings in order to fit the researcher's proposed objectives (Babbie & Mouton, 2001). The researcher in this study avoided all manipulation of the findings and ensured that the report contained all the necessary information.

### **1.10 Reflexivity**

It is vital that the researcher is aware of her feelings towards the subject area of the study in order to be able to keep emotions separate from the research process (De Vos et al, 2005). The researcher initially entered social work for motivations other than childhood experiences, namely looking for a purpose, wanting an alternative career for later life and needing to feel a sense of achievement.

The need to explore more fully and engage in personal growth was initially an unconscious need. However, in the process of the studies the researcher realised that through the

knowledge accrued and the interaction with clients, often with similar issues, much of this resonated with her childhood experiences. The researcher only realised at this juncture that there were personal issues that needed to be worked on. It was the experience of the researcher that it was necessary to go through, experience and ingest a fair amount of the social work programme before becoming fully aware of just how the programme triggers the need for self-introspection and personal growth.

It was vital that the researcher was cognizant of her process and that the feelings and experiences of the researcher did not influence the research process. The researcher was aware of the need to separate her experiences from the research findings and to report on the data in an objective manner. The researcher is confident that she has been able to keep her own experiences separate from the research.

### **1.11 Structure of the research report**

This research report consists of the following: chapter one of this report covers problem formulation. Chapter two presents literature pertinent to the study. Chapter three outlines the research methodology and chapter four discusses the findings obtained from the research. The final chapter provides the conclusions and recommendations resulting from the study.

### **1.12 Conclusion**

Encapsulated in this chapter, are the problem formulation, rationale, concept clarification and ethical considerations. A section on the reflexivity of the researcher was also included. The structure of the research report was clarified. The following chapter presents the literature review.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **2.1 Introduction**

The literature review firstly discusses the theoretical frameworks which underpin this study. The review will then present a discussion on childhood and what this usually entails, as well as family functioning. After researching many possible defining childhood experiences that influence individuals during childhood, it was noted that certain core recurrent issues were most prevalent and had the most impact on children. These include poverty, child abuse, divorce, the death of a family member, mood disorders and loneliness in childhood and eating disorders. These core issues will be highlighted in the review. A discussion on social work as a profession and supervision will follow. Finally this chapter will present a discussion on further motivations that could influence the student's decision to study social work followed by concluding remarks.

#### **2.2 Theoretical frameworks**

Bowen's Family Systems Theory is discussed (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2008) followed by the Wounded Healer Theory (MacCulloch & Shattell, 2009).

##### **2.2.1 Family systems theory**

Historically Bowen has been acknowledged as one of the foremost thinkers and developers of Family Systems Theory. Most of the subsequent mainstream therapy has been shaped using Bowen's theory as a foundation. "Bowen conceptualised the family as an emotional unit, a network of interlocking relationships, best understood when analysed within a multigenerational or historical framework" (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2008: 177). Systems theory deals primarily with relationships and patterns of interaction (Goldenberg and Goldenberg, 2008; Barker, 2007; Nichols, 2004). Some family systems theory addresses issues relating to the family as a unit, while others involve the interface between the family and the individual. Further theory relates to the family and the external world. Families tend

to change, adapt, constrain, recruit, mediate, indoctrinate, develop and act through individuals (Grotevant, 1989; Barker, 2007).

Actions by an individual family member will affect all the other family members and their reactions to these actions will have a reciprocal effect on the individual. The characteristics of the Family Systems Theory include the notion that the family consists of subsystems, and is shaped by boundaries and rules that govern the state of separateness or connectedness of this subsystem. The family also has functions to accomplish such as the support, regulation, nurturance and socialisation of its members. The family is constantly in the process of reorganising and evolving itself (Robertson, 2005).

An acknowledged part of family systems theory is that the family is greater than the sum of its parts (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2008). Change in one part of the system results in change within the entire system. Therefore dysfunction or trauma experienced in any part of the system should be understood within the context of the entire family rather than separate individuals (Freeman, 1992).

By far the majority of students will enter into the university directly from their family of origin. Dysfunction experienced by one family member will impact on the entire family. Family stress which results from dysfunctions or traumas experienced within the family context can be seen as an imbalance between family demands and the capabilities of the family (Boss, 1988). In the same manner that individuals have the ability to manage their stressors, so does the family unit have strengths and internal and external resources that counteract the stressful impact (McKenry & Price, 1994).

Family Systems Theory is relevant to this research in that it clarifies how the family system functions and how a change in one part of the family impacts the entire system. The family structure, family functioning and system changes such as divorce or death in the family impact the child in fundamental ways. Thus the family system with all its anomalies could be the determining factor that motivates students towards the study of social work.

### **2.2.2 The wounded healer**

The Theory of the Wounded Healer refers to individuals who work in the helping professions and have a prior history of “woundedness”. The wounded healer is an individual who works

with others and is informed by their difficult past in the work that they do. In searching for cures for their own past difficult experiences, the individual learns to be an effective healer for others. It is often the person's wounds that are at the root of them becoming an effective healer. Healers tend to connect their past experience to their work with others (Wolfgang, 2010 ; Jackson, 2001).

Professionals working in therapeutic fields are drawn towards healing through their own vulnerability which resulted from their personal painful life experiences. These helper's painful experiences assist in contributing to their skill, sensitivity and insight, enabling them to become effective professionals (Jackson, 2001 and Guggenbuhl-Craig, 1971 cited in MacCulloch & Shattell, 2009).

Wounded individuals are drawn to places that may offer the hope or the possibility of increased personal growth and wholeness. This process of seeking out potentially hopeful places may be either conscious or unconscious. Many people are drawn to an environment, a profession or a specific role accompanied by specific knowledge that holds the possibility of both insight and healing. These wounded individuals hope that such an environment might support them in their quest for wholeness. Very often there is a definite desire for individuals to be altruistic as well as receive the healing they require. There is often an unconscious need to access the necessary healing in order to attempt to self-actualise (MacCulloch & Shattell, 2009).

Many children take on adult roles and chores often through necessity and in later life these caring roles contribute to their gravitation towards the caring professions such as social service. These individuals may be viewed as wounded healers and this work helps them to come to terms with their personal hurt, pain and disappointments. The profession of social work would then validate the individual for taking on these childhood roles just as the worker is validated for these same caretaking behaviours (DiCaccavo, 2002 ; Dell, Crafter, de Abreu and Cline, 2010).

Many of the motives to become a clinical social worker are unconscious and individuals enter the profession in order to heal themselves rather than save the world. These motivations frequently include childhood loss, unsatisfied narcissistic needs for endorsement and recognition as well as a need to work through their own problems in the

realm of the profession. It is apparent that social workers are willing to deal with multiple frustrations in their search to become more real and authentic (Kottler, 2010).

The benefits that the profession provides include the ability to heal the self through this process. Social workers learn incredible powers of concentration and focus. Through self-control the helper ignores all distractions and focuses on the unfolding narrative and its presenter. Every day the social worker is confronted with the issues they fear most and through this process healing can take place (Kottler, 2010).

From this theory it is evident that individuals who have experienced childhood difficulties are drawn to helping others because it helps them to deal with their own painful experiences and assists them in their quest for wholeness.

### **2.3 Childhood and family functioning**

The definition of 'normal' with regards to childhood is problematic as the term refers to many different concepts. The frame of reference and the subjective position of the observer need to be taken into consideration. Cultural norms also need to be noted when attempting to define a 'normal childhood' (Walsh, 1993).

Childhood is according to Montgomery, Burr and Woodhead (2003) and Barker (2007) a universal state and is the result of certain times, cultures and environments. Normal families (therefore implying a normal childhood) can be classified according to numerous aspects, such as asymptomatic functioning which states that there must be an absence of symptoms of any disorders in the family (Walsh, 1993; Chambers, 2012). A 'typical' or 'average' family is considered normal, where it fits an ordinary, common and expectable pattern. A healthy family can also be defined as a family that functions well, accomplishes family and individual tasks successfully and the members are given the space to embrace personal growth.

The concept of normal can be used to note the ordinary, typical and expected processes of a family unit over a long period of time, certain stressors are considered normal, such as grief at the unexpected death of a child (Walsh, 1993). A functional family, in other words is a workable family, one that has an intact family unit and is able to solve its problems as well as a family that has a bond and a sense of wellbeing. A student characterising this type of childhood will have had a 'normal' childhood. On the other hand dysfunctional is a term

that refers to an unworkable family where there are various symptoms of distress in the home. It is important not to label ordinary families struggling with day to day living as dysfunctional as opposed to families where there is neglect, abuse, mental disorders and substance problems (Walsh, 1993; Barker, 2007; Chambers, 2012).

Childhood is affected by governmental policies, dominant thinking of larger groups, social attitudes and cultural practices. Childhood is impacted by predictable chronological changes as well as unexpected events such as wars, epidemics, natural disasters or dramatic economic changes that shape the experiences of a society (Garbarino, 1995).

There are, according to Montgomery et al (2003) socio-political dimensions that affect childhood such as poverty and underdevelopment. In South Africa children may experience a first world type of environment in which a normal childhood is characterised by relative affluence, family stability, good health and good education or the opposite which is often characterised by poverty, ill health, violence and inequality.

The function of families is to meet the needs of its members. Segrin and Flora (2005) conclude that the primary and most important function of the family is to nurture and socialise all family members. This includes the provision of basic care, emotional support and financial support. For many years beyond childhood individuals may rely on their parents for basic or economic support of one kind or another. Emotional support from family members provides individuals with a sense of belonging, kinship, love, affection, companionship, acceptance and a sense of security. Parents instruct their children in their cultural traditions and rituals, values, religious convictions and political ideologies.

The overall functioning of the family unit is vital to the child's healthy emotional functioning and has consequences for future life choices. If the family functions optimally there will be no need for the individual to pursue a career for the sake of personal healing, however if the family functioning is defective this could possibly lead the student towards a career that offers what they need, namely psychological healing (Segrin & Flora, 2005).

The following sections will concentrate on key childhood experiences which can influence a child's development. These topics were selected as a result of the researcher discovering that these were identified in the literature as core experiences in childhood.

## **2.4 Key childhood experiences**

### **2.4.1 Environmental Factors**

#### **2.4.1.1 Poverty**

With the inception of Apartheid in South Africa in 1948 began the intensification of a process of impoverishment that had begun three hundred years previously (Wilson & Ramphela, 1989). Rural poverty in South Africa arose from historically-generated power inequalities and there has been very little change since the transformation to democracy. There have however been improvements in rural infrastructure namely housing and pensions, child grants and disability grants were introduced (Francis, 2006 and Aliber, 2003). However the unemployment rates have increased. In 2005 the Government's Labour Force Survey showed that 26.7% of the national labour force was unemployed; this is not taking into account the further 14.8% classified as 'discouraged workers' (Francis, 2006).

The roots of poverty in South Africa presently and the continued existence of this phenomenon are as a result of several processes. The causes of poverty however, of the chronically poor those who have been poor for five years or more and the transient poor those that are momentarily poor and may have the potential to rise above it are different and the interventions need to differ accordingly (Francis, 2006 & Aliber, 2003). Poverty is a multifaceted phenomenon with causes and consequences that remain highly complex. Poverty often results from either growing up in a single parent household or from having caretakers that have poor earning power (Cohen, 2010). In South Africa, poverty exists alongside of wealth so counteracting poverty is connected to counteracting inequality (Noyoo, 2004 & May, 2000).

The actual experience of poverty is multidimensional and one of the chief experiences of being poor is a sense of powerlessness, says May (2000), and this feeling is even further compounded when combined with gender power relations.

The effects of poverty can be vast and pervasive and can hugely impact on the health of children. Poor children are more likely to become ill, get sicker and die at higher rates than do non-poor children (Starfield, 1992; Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997). Where there is an impoverished family that has few material resources the children tend to do less well in

school and in other aspects of life. Poverty affects the ways in which parents monitor their children and respond to their needs in general. Poverty also minimises parent's ability to socialise children in ways that are beneficial to their well-being. Where the parent's physical and emotional health is poor there follows a dearth of learning opportunities and experiences for the children, this consequently impacting on their school performance (Guo & Harris, 2000 and Eamon, 2001). The effects of poverty on children are dire, owing to the fact that in a poor community disease is prevalent amongst adults and children alike, the infant mortality rate is high, school dropout rates are high and malnutrition amongst children is widespread (De Beer & Swanepoel, 2006).

UCT students who grew up in a poverty stricken environment would have experienced the conditions and emotions mentioned above. This childhood experience may have impacted the student's need to enter into social work in order to assist those still trapped in poverty. This could also be aligned with a need to escape from poverty, through the avenue of tertiary education which holds the prospect of a reasonable income.

Another key childhood experience is child abuse.

#### **2.4.1.2 Child abuse**

Child abuse can be defined as physical abuse, sexual abuse, malnutrition, failure to thrive, medical neglect, mental abuse and educational neglect, however many years of research have failed to produce a definition of child abuse that is uniformly accepted and applied (Gelles & Lancaster, 2005).

The reason for such a high rate of child abuse in South Africa is that the nature of the society is extremely violent, as well as the patriarchal nature of many communities where men claim power over women and children, which can be extended to physical and sexual child abuse. Poverty is widespread in the country and is regarded as the number one cause of high levels of child abuse. Alcohol and substance abuse result in a lack of inhibitions and reduced impulse control and this combination is recognised as an indicator for child abuse. The combination of frustrations regarding poverty, continued joblessness and endless unproductive time are common ingredients for child abuse (Richter & Dawes, 2008).

Pritchard (2004), Sue, Sue and Sue (2003) and Kemp (1998) conclude that the most commonly found type of abuse is physical abuse and is identified as attempted suffocation, biting, scalding, poisoning, frequent hitting, causing severe bruising and fractures, shaking of young children and retinal haemorrhaging. Any and all sexual contact between a child and an adult is considered as sexual abuse. Sexual abuse exists on a continuum which is enormously variable (Pritchard, 2004; Madu & Peltzer, 2000; Kemp, 1998).

Pritchard (2004) and Briere (1992) state that emotional abuse is amongst all other forms of abuse the most difficult to define, measure, assess and observe. The different aspects of psychological abuse include badgering, terrorising, bullying etc (Pritchard, 2004; Kemp, 1998).

Some abused children function at extremely high levels in later life, whilst others function differently, having adjustment problems or developing chemical dependency (Kemp, 1998; Briere, 1992). As children, victims of abuse often result in higher rates of developmental delays and greater social and emotional difficulties than unaffected children. Although researchers agree that child maltreatment results in multiple and often devastating consequences, the uncovering of the developmental and socio-emotional consequences of child maltreatment are difficult to prove. There is however no doubt that the consequences of child abuse ranging from mild to extremely severe are always detrimental (Gelles & Lancaster, 2005; Sue et al 2003).

There are also factors within the family such as divorce which is considered as a defining experience in childhood.

## **2.4.2 Family Factors**

### **2.4.2.1 Divorce**

Of all the changes in the family system in recent years, the most harrowing and far reaching is the increase in the divorce rate. It has been established by demographers that approximately half of all marriages initiated in recent times will end in dissolution. This change has evolved due to a number of factors; among them the economic independence of women, the declining earnings of men without the requisite education, the increasing expectations for personal fulfilment from marriage and the increased social acceptance of

divorce (Amato, 2000; Trent & South, 1989). Divorce was reconceptualised over two decades ago to be a process that happens over time and involves numerous challenges and changes for both adults and children alike (Kelly & Emery, 2003).

The divorce-adjustment process according to Amato (2000) begins while the family still lives in the same residence and ends long after the legalities have been concluded. Generally for the majority of children and adolescents the uncoupling process of the parents' marriage is extremely disturbing.

For many children the stress begins before the separation process due to conflict and violence within the marriage. Owing to the fact that many children have insufficient preparation for their parent's separation and consequent divorce, the emotions experienced can include distress, anxiety, shock, anger and disbelief (Kelly & Emery, 2003; Sandler, Tien, Mehta, Wolchik, & Ayers, 2000).

Although divorce is generally a traumatic occurrence in a child's life, successful adjustment can occur to the extent that individuals can experience minimal divorce related symptoms and are able to function adequately in a new family system and school (Amato, 2000; Kelly 2003).

Ahrons (2004) argues that not all children of divorce are destined to have serious problems for the rest of their lives. The majority of children will not suffer long term effects; in fact divorce may represent for some children an escape from a dysfunctional home environment. It is important to note the manner in which children cognitively appraise the divorce; some individuals may view the divorce as a personal tragedy whilst others, not left unscathed, may view it as a positive event opening them up to new opportunities. Another positive consequence of divorce is that some children especially daughters bond very closely with their custodial parent. There are however demographic characteristics that can have a moderating effect on divorce such as gender, age, ethnicity and culture (Gordon, 2005; Amato, 2000).

#### **2.4.2.2 Death of a family member**

Another trauma which children may face is the death of a loved one. Of all the different experiences of deaths, the loss of a parent has the most severe consequences for the family.

The child loses not only a parent that is loved, but there is also less stability, less attention and the total disruption of their daily routine. Most children say Dyregrov (1998) and Rowling (2003) go into denial regarding the finality of a parent's death because the emotional magnitude of this event can only be processed step by step. Some of the usual grief reactions from children include anxiety, sleep difficulties, eating difficulties, sadness and longing, vivid memories, guilt as well as anger and acting out (Dyregrov, 1998; Parkes, 2006).

Children at different stages of life perceive death differently. Preschool children are able to experience sadness and so when a loved one dies they are able to grieve in their own way. School children between about 7 to 11 years of age, start to understand the permanence of death but generally perceive it as removed from them. Pre-pubertal children tend to understand death in more abstract terms and adolescents can become captivated with the whole experience of death, yet may not be fully cognisant of the finality of death. Adolescents may question the concept of fairness, the nature of life and death and the meaning of life (Morgan & Roberts, 2010).

The death of a parent or a sibling may be similar; however the intensity, duration and the on-going consequences are usually deepened with the loss of a parent. When there is the death of a child or sibling there is a resulting effect on the emotional climate in the home. The surviving children lose a playmate and a rival and for an undetermined period lose parental care and attention (Dyregrov, 1998; McCarthy, 2006; Parkes, 2006). The surviving children also observe their parent's strong emotions and they become for a time the focus of their parent's fear that something bad will happen to them as well. Parents could also display heightened anxiety, lack of energy, guilt and overprotective behaviour, all of which impacts on the child. Death of a child causes a massive strain on the family system and the grief of the parents may result in them drifting apart or becoming involved in intense conflict (Dyregrov, 1998).

Students who have had the childhood experience of death would have experienced huge loss and may have also experienced intense sadness, the fragmentation of the family, the decline of personal attention, the increase of conflict in the home as well as feelings of insecurity.

This section has highlighted divorce and the death of a family member. The following section will discuss individual factors which can be detrimental in childhood.

### **2.4.3 Individual Factors**

#### **2.4.3.1 Mood disorders and loneliness in childhood**

Mood disorders in children include depressive disorder, dysthymic disorder and bipolar disorder. Approximately five percent of children and adolescents in the general population suffer from depression at any point in time. Recently it has come to be accepted that children can suffer from adult-type depression and there is evidence of a continuity of depressive symptoms from pre-puberty into adult life (Barker, 2004).

These disorders often go unrecognised in families and are considered to be normal mood swings of children of a particular developmental stage (Papalia, Olds & Feldman, 2004; Barkley & Mash, 2003). The child may present with anxiety, crying, sleep problems, feelings of unworthiness, weight change, physical complaints, fatigue, and inability to concentrate or frequent thoughts about death or suicide. Depression can ultimately lead children to attempted suicide.

Sue et al (2003) note that the risk factors associated with depression in children appear to be equal for both boys and girls in childhood; however during adolescence girls are twice as likely to develop depression. Papalia et al (2004) concludes that this gender difference may be related to the biological changes connected to puberty or the way in which girls are socialised. The other risk factors pertaining to mood disorders include stress, smoking, loss of a parent or loved one, abuse, neglect, chronic illness or diabetes, learning disorders, breakup of a romantic relationship and attentional or conduct disorders (Sue et al, 2003).

Pre-pubertal depression in children is often associated with a dysfunctional family with a history of parental depression, anxiety or alcoholism and is frequently found in conjunction with antisocial behaviour. Co-morbidity is prevalent in children with depression. Obsessive-compulsive disorders and conduct disorder often co-exist with depression as so too have anxiety and eating disorders been associated with depression in children (Barker, 2004; Barkley & Mash, 2003).

One of the most significant causes of depression in childhood is genetics as genetic factors can predispose a person to depression but additional non genetic factors are required to produce the disorder (Sue et al, 2003).

Environmental factors can also contribute to depression in children. Any trauma experienced particularly with regard to parents such as marital strife, divorce or admission of a parent to hospital for an extended period of time can result in depression (Barker, 2004). A mood disorder can also be attributed to children living in conditions that are painful and disturbing and over which they have no control. The term for this condition is learned helplessness and is a condition by which the self-esteem and sense of security of the child has become impaired. Often under these circumstances the child feels unworthy and feels that the expectations of caregivers just cannot be met (Barker, 2004; Heim & Nemeroff, 2001).

Depression is also associated with chronic loneliness in childhood as is evident in the following section.

Kirova (2001) and Rotenberg and Hymel (1999) found loneliness to be common in childhood and adolescence and is an experience that contrasts both as a function of children and adolescent's social life and of their psychological make-up. Social loneliness results in a deficiency of a network of social relationships that provide a sense of community and emotional loneliness is the result of a lack of intimate personal attachments. A continuous pattern of loneliness, poses a threat to a child's mental health and psychosocial functioning. Loneliness in children is associated with being rejected by peers, being victimised, disruptive behaviours, aggression and shyness (Rotenberg & Hymel, 1999).

There are children however who are simply uninterested in forming relationships, they desire solitude for very good reasons and do not experience loneliness (Baron, Bryne & Branscombe, 2006). The roots of dispositional loneliness include a mixture of genetics, attachment style and the chance for early social experiences with peers.

In childhood, loneliness can be a short term phenomenon in response to separation from a friend and typically is not cause for concern state Asher and Paquette (2003). Chronic loneliness in childhood and adolescence is associated with various maladjustments such as

depression, leaving school early, alcohol use and medical problems (Qualter, Brown, Munn & Rotenberg 2010).

The following section will examine eating disorders in childhood as well as the factors that contribute towards this disorder.

### **2.4.3.2 Eating disorders in children**

Eating disorders in children and young adolescents are suspected less often, as well as more difficult to diagnose definitively and there is less evidence to guide treatment decisions (Rosen, 2003). There are three distinct forms of eating disorders. Anorexia nervosa involves restricting food intake and binge eating contrasted with purging. Bulimia nervosa takes the form of purging and non-purging and then finally a binge eating disorder occurs when there are recurrent episodes of binge eating (Sue et al, 2003; Bryant-Waugh & Lask, 1995).

Concerns with body image and how individuals perceive their appearance often increases in adolescence and may result in obsessive efforts to control weight. This pattern of behaviour is more common amongst girls than boys and is unlikely to be related purely to actual weight problems (Papalia et al, 2004).

Parental attitudes and media images play a greater role in furthering weight concerns than the influence of peers (Papalia et al, 2004; Polivy & Herman, 2002). Girls and boys who consider weight to be important to their parents are often inclined towards constant control of food intake. Eating disorders are common amongst girls who are driven to excel in competitive activities such as ballet, gymnastics, running or dancing, also girls with single or divorced parents and girls who frequently eat alone (Papalia, et al 2004; Higgs, Goodyer & Birch, 1989).

Eating disorders in children are multifactorial in origin with substantial genetic, biological psychological, familial and socio cultural associated risk factors (Rosen, 2003; Polivy & Herman, 2002).

Environmental and genetic factors have been cited as the cause of the disease (Sue et al, 2003). Family dysfunction has been implicated repeatedly in the pathogenesis of eating

disorders and families are understood to precipitate or maintain these disordered eating patterns.

The above section discussed eating disorders in childhood. The following section will discuss social work as a profession in South Africa.

## **2.5 Social work as a profession**

Social work in South Africa has evolved since the advent of democracy in 1994 and the Apartheid welfare focus has shifted, from a remedial system to a fully inclusive developmental system. Along with this shift the duplications of efforts, the inefficiency and differing standards were reduced (Earle, 2008; Brown and Neku, 2005; Patel, 2005).

Despite all these changes social work as a profession is still influenced by its past and according to Earle (2008); Brown and Neku (2005) and Gray (2000) many of the changes have had a substantial but negative impact on the practice of social work in South Africa. Many issues such as the lack of adequate leadership, changes that are implemented inconsistently, the lack of human capacity within the Department of Social Development as well as the lack of insight into the consequences of the changes implemented all impact negatively on the system. Corruption and inefficiency in the supporting departments of Social Development is also problematic (Earle, 2008). Another problem has been the ongoing tension between the non-governmental organisations and the department resulting in constraints in the funding provided to these organisations, drastically curtailing their functioning within the communities. The social work profession is sadly dogged by high workloads, poor support, minimal resources, poor working conditions and inadequate salaries (Earle, 2008; Brown & Neku, 2005; Gray, 2000). Many social workers have been forced to explore other alternatives such as moving abroad, entering into management or education (Earle, 2008).

The picture of social work is however not all negative, as although the process of transformation has been painful the social security programme has managed to successfully reduce poverty in a relatively short period of time (Patel, 2008 and Gray, 2000). Since the drafting of the Scare Skills Framework in 2003 a policy to recruit and retain social workers has been implemented, bursaries for students have been offered by the Department of

Social Development and salaries for social workers have increased. Despite these positive changes the profession of social work in South Africa remains challenging (Earle, 2008).

The Bachelor of Social Work degree (BSW) implemented in 2007 requires that there be African specific knowledge within the curricula meeting the needs of the African population as opposed to practice in a first world scenario which the previous qualifications favoured (Earle, 2008).

It is concluded in the literature that social work education is generally a knowledge driven process however this process also requires the training of high level skills in order to produce social workers who are socially responsible and are conscious of their role in social transformation. It is vital that there is a reflection on the needs and requirements of the larger African population and the impact of structural concerns on social problems for example poverty on a vast scale, malnutrition, and housing (Earle, 2008; Lombard and Du Preez, 2004).

According to Earle (2008) and Brown and Neku (2005) communication is a central function and the context the eleven languages and the cultural diversity make language relevant to all South African social workers. It is acknowledged that people like to converse about their personal problems in their mother tongue. Many social workers found that language was a barrier to the ease with which they were able to practice, particularly in rural areas where indigenous languages dominated.

DiCavacco (2002) states that students who possessed altruistic tendencies frequently enter into this field particularly after experiencing disillusionment in other more traditional fields of study. The desire to find greater personal satisfaction and the desire to work with people at grassroots levels, leads them towards social work. The reasons for the choice of social work were as follows; working with people, contributing to society, beliefs that they could be successful in this nature of work and achieving social change. (DiCavacco, 2002 cited in Hanson & McCullach, 1995).

DiCavacco (2002) established that in South Africa, across the socio-economic and racial divides there was an overwhelming need to help those in need and to make a difference in communities. It is acknowledged by the author that the image of social work in the past ten

years or so has been very poor, resulting in a crisis in the social worker's identity. Earle (2008) concludes that the status of the profession has been systematically undermined as well as the confidence and ability of the social work profession as a whole. In comparison to work in other professions, working conditions in social services are substandard (DiCavacco, 2002). The realities are that the hours are long the work is hard and inconsistent and stressful. Burnout is also an extremely high probability in this profession. There is also a tendency amongst these professionals to take the work home. There is the possibility of numerous personal disappointments as the clients in their care commit crimes, die unexpectedly or return to unhealthy habits such as drug taking (DiCavacco 2002).

Students' personal and family situations impacted considerably on their ability to successfully complete the social work degree (Earle, 2008). Many reasons why students contemplate or actually terminate their studies include pregnancies, the inability to access sufficient finances and support for individual social problems, poverty, the limited availability of physical and human resource support within the departments of education, students pursuing the career for the wrong reasons and personal social problems (Earle, 2008).

There are special hardships associated with the provision of social services. The setting in which this is practiced brings with it overwhelming and tragic stories. There are special problems for novices in that being a social worker changes all their relationships, they will face their most disturbing demons weekly and the helper will be underpaid and underappreciated. Stress in the profession is huge in that there is not only client induced stress, but work environment stress, self-induced and event induced stress. Other stresses facing the clinician are fatigue, burnout, isolation and lack of money. Much of the above is relevant to the social work student as well (Kottler,2010).

In social work in South African there are two approaches to social work namely community work where the social worker works predominately within the communities using whatever approach is necessary. The other approach is clinical social work where the helper is involved in group, individual and family interventions. In South Africa the Bachelor of Social Work degree is offered as a generalist degree i.e. students are prepared to work with client

groups in numerous settings. The specialisations mentioned above are however catered for in the masters' programme (Spolander, Pullen-Sansfacon, Brown & Engelbrecht, 2011).

Internationally there is a quest for new approaches to social welfare and social work practice in order to address the problems of oppression, poverty, inequality, discrimination and other social ills (Patel, 2005 and Noyoo, 2000). In South Africa the social work focus has shifted away from the dominance of casework as a method of social work as well as the over-dependence on rehabilitative and protective services and moved towards preventative and developmental programs. These developmental programs include group and community development strategies and community education. The focus is now on a commitment to social welfare and development with a focus on the pro-poor policies (Patel, 2005; Bak, 2004; Gray, 2000).

A core part of social work training is supervision. The following section will discuss supervision and the value of this supervision for students.

### **2.5.1 Social work supervision**

Students are introduced to supervision early on in the social work degree and the ultimate goal of supervision states Engelbrecht (2004) is to promote competence amongst students. Social work supervision is an educational process, whereby the supervisor has the task of imparting knowledge, skills and values to the supervisee (Shulman, 2010). These supervisory skills are designed to enrich the worker's skills, increase the effectiveness with which the supervisee completes the tasks and co-ordinate many workers and their functions into a smoothly articulated whole. Kadushin (1992) added to the above tasks and articulated that supervision entails an expressive-supportive leadership function which encompasses the offer of emotional support as well as assistance in job completion. Supervision is a dynamic, interactional and multiparty relationship with efficient and effective service ranked as the ultimate objective of social work supervision (Tsui, 2005).

The value of supervision is both educational and administrative and the ultimate objective of supervision is to assist the social worker so that the quality of the agency's services is improved. Supervision also helps maintain the morale of the helper and assists with work related discontent and discouragement. Supervision can also provide the worker with a

sense of belonging in the agency, a sense of worth as a professional, and a sense of security in performance. The potential value of effective supervision for the student, the agency and the clients is massive (Kadushin & Harkness, 2002).

Supervision for social work students is imperative as it promotes self-awareness and enables them to apply their knowledge to practice in the field. It is imperative that the supervision take place in the context of a positive relationship. The supervisee has an active role to play in the supervision process and without this active role and involvement on behalf of the worker, the supervisor would be unable to implement his or her functions (Engelbrecht, 2004; Shulman, 2010).

Empowerment refers to the increased assertiveness and other self-management skills of the individuals being assisted. An empowerment model applied to supervision can build capacity within the students when there is joint critical, reflective and imaginative thinking and when both supervisor and student talk and listen and make joint decisions. Capacity is also built when there is mutual respect and when the learning process is personalised and everyone shares in the ownership of teaching (Aldarondo, 2007).

Finally in implementation of the empowerment model the supervisor is no longer the all-knowing expert but encourages the student's input, knowledge and experience. This empowerment model creates independence and leads to capacity building of students, assisting them to develop self-control with regards to their reactions and decisions. It also aims to develop the students' competencies and critical thinking skills (Engelbrecht, 2004).

## **2.6 Further motivations for studying social work**

### **2.6.1 Spiritual Motivations**

Social work originated from religious roots, it was considered the vocation to help the poor and seek social justice; however the field turned away from its religious roots in order to be considered a credible profession. For a time religion and spirituality were unmentionable topics in social work. Nowadays however religion is considered consistent with social work's holistic approach which recognises the innumerable issues that shape the individual's experience (Russel, 1998).

Social work was seen by many as an avenue through which they could live out their faith, that faith informs practice and practice informs faith and that spirituality can improve the personal and professional sense of vocation brought to social work. It is the author's opinion that spiritual beliefs and values influence choice of profession and practice of the social worker (Wagenfeld-Heintz, 2009). Individuals often enter into social work due to spiritual motivations (Russel, 1998).

Graff (2007) in her research noted that there is little information regarding the religious affiliation of students, however by far the majority of students in her research were social workers of Christian and Buddhist persuasions. All spiritual traditions including Islam, Buddhism, Confucianism, Hinduism, Judaism and non-sectarian spiritual perspectives proclaim their highest aspirations as love and compassion and students of all spiritual persuasions enter into the social work arena (Canda & Furman, 2010).

Singletary, Wilson, Myers and Scales (2006) conclude that social work is both a vocation and a career with the emphasis on purpose and service to others. 'Vocation' means that the individual is not only drawn to a particular profession but the individual is drawn to serve in faith based as well as nonspiritual institutions. Students articulated that they were doing what God was leading them to do and referred to social work as a calling rather than a career. Social work also gave these individuals the opportunity to live out their values in union with the core values of social work in a professional setting (Wilson & McCrystal, 2007).

The intrinsic compulsion to pursue the profession of social work can originate from woundedness, however this is not always true as many students who follow a career in social work may be inspired to do so because they see it as a calling (Freeman, 2007).

Over the past decade there has been an intensification of interest in the expression of religious belief in work. It is acknowledged through the writings on this topic that both individuals and organisations have lost meaning and this needs to be improved in ways in which enhances both output and well-being. Spiritual beliefs strongly determine career choice and one of the main purposes of the participants in the research of was that of serving others, concluding that there is a link between spiritual beliefs and social work (Lips-Wiersma and Silva, 2000).

This section highlighted the spiritual motivations that encourage the pursuit of social work. The following section will discuss the role that altruism plays in drawing individuals towards social work.

### **2.6.2 Altruism**

There is according to Baron, Byrne and Branscombe (2006) and Specht and Courtney (1994) an altruistic personality and the concepts therein include empathy, belief in a just world, an internal locus of control, acceptance of social responsibility and finally there is low egocentrism. Many of the aspirant social workers will possess these personality traits in full or part thereof. Altruism is undoubtedly a driving force behind helpers' actions and motives and that they derive a massive feeling of elation from knowing that their efforts have borne fruit. There is joy felt from knowing that the helper has made a difference and this 'helper's high' can bring about a surge of inner peace and well-being (Kottler, 2010).

### **2.6.3 Contact with social workers in childhood**

DiCaccavo (2002) found that many social workers were drawn to the profession if they had contact with social workers in their family or community growing up. Owing to this experience the role of the social worker becomes a tangible option as the child observes the adult in professional mode. Receiving effective social work services in the past inspired many students to study social work according to Earle (2008) and Hanson and McCullagh (1995). Although this phenomenon was universal in nature, for unknown reasons, it was expressed considerably more by African students from Limpopo. Not however was it only this effective service received that enticed the students into social work, but also the awareness of the problems in their own communities. Notably the coloured and African students from Stellenbosch expressed that they were drawn towards social work, through their experience of the substantive problems within their communities (Earle, 2002).

### **2.6.4 Other personal motivations**

Students enter university, in order to achieve employment in later life and to search for meaning and purpose. Students have a desire to gather further perspective on who they are, what is important to them and to become the person they are meant to be. According to research, students of social work generally appear to want to pursue personal

transformation in conjunction with the degree (Freeman, 2007). The need to understand the 'self' often in the wake of a turbulent childhood is one of the primary motivations presented by students regarding their motivations for pursuing social work as a career. Many social workers are idealists and their core needs are for meaning and significance that is derived from a sense of purpose and working towards the greater good. A social worker or counsellor is born or at least made as a child. It is known that many who enter into the social services decided this from a young age (DiCaccavo, 2002).

Social workers enter the profession for a wide range of motivations other than the desire to help others, notably the influence of a role model, job security, opportunities for career development and some students do find the promise of the remuneration appealing (Wilson and McCrystal, 2007; Borgzaga and Tortia, 2006). Many students although they choose to enter social work they do not enter with the idea of the traditional mission of serving the vulnerable, but choose to follow a career in private practice, such as psychotherapy. These students are motivated by a specific career path rather than generalised social work (Limb and Organista, 2006).

Owing to the fact that the majority of social work students are inspired by reasons other than financial, it is important that the educators create an educational environment that promotes the social worker's ability to empathise, believe in the potential of humans, challenge social injustice and at the same time release the previously held perspectives that may conflict with the social worker's ethics, values and principles. This transformation is not just an educational process but also a spiritual process (Freeman, 2007).

## **2.7 Conclusion**

The literature review discussed the theoretical frameworks that underpin this study. An outline of normal childhood and family functioning, key childhood experiences, social work as a profession and motivations drawing students towards the profession were presented. The following chapter will discuss the methodology used in the research.

## CHAPTER THREE

### METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the methodology employed in the research. There will be a discussion of the research design, followed by a description of the research population and sampling strategies as well as data collection and analysis. Finally the limitations of this research will be reflected upon.

#### 3.2 Research design

Research design is a strategic framework for undertaking research and is a detailed plan for how a research study is conducted. (De Vos, Strydom, Fouche, Delpont, 2005) A qualitative research design was adopted for this research and this entailed investigating, exploring and interpreting participants' experiences in childhood and other motivations that may have prompted entry into social work. "Qualitative research is the study of people in their natural environments as they go about their daily lives....it strives to understand the meaning people's words and behaviours have for them" (Tutty, Rothery and Grinnell, 1996: 4). Therefore in qualitative research, the individuals are studied in their entirety and complexity. According to Babbie and Mouton (2001) qualitative research focuses on the process rather than the outcome and the researcher is the main tool.

Qualitative research of this nature attempted to understand the meanings individuals attach to their experiences. This type of research generally aims to gather a comprehensive understanding of human behaviour as the here and now experiences cannot be reduced to measurable variables (Tutty, et al, 1996). This qualitative research extracted the subjective meanings that the participants attached to their experiences and the researcher was then able to explore the experiences of the participants as well as the meanings they assigned to them.

The nature of this study was exploratory. An exploratory approach means that very little is known about the topic and the aim is to explore and define the problem. (De Vos et al,

2005). This research was exploratory because the researcher had limited knowledge about the subject and wanted to engage in direct exploration from individuals who are experiencing the subject under study. In this research the exploration aimed to gather information as to the participants' key childhood experiences and other motivations which may have influenced their entry into social work. Due to the exploratory nature of this research, it was best to employ a qualitative paradigm in order to capture the findings.

The research was interpretive in nature. Bhana and Kanjee (2001 : 142) noted that "based on the assumption that all human action is meaningful and has to be interpreted and understood in the context of social practice..." This research attempted to understand and interpret the participants' key childhood experiences that influenced their entry into the field of social work so that the researcher could note the influences and motivations that are pertinent in the participant's lives and examine if the university and its curriculum are meeting the needs of the participants in order to curtail unnecessary failure or drop outs. The advantage of a qualitative approach was that it permitted a diversity of responses as well as the space to adjust to alternative developments during the research process (Tutty et al, 1996).

### **3.3 Sampling strategy**

Sampling is the process of taking any portion of a population as being considered representative of that population (Kerlinger, 2000). The sample employed is always a smaller section of the selected population (De Vos et al, 2005).

A non-probability sampling technique was used in this research. This technique ensures that the sample has not been randomly chosen, according to (De Vos et al, 2005). This particular technique was chosen because it allowed for purposive sampling, which is a form of non-probability sampling in which the sample is chosen using the judgement of the researcher as well as the availability of the subjects (De Vos et al, 2005). When using a qualitative design, the sample is selected because of its unique knowledge of the topic and thus the reason for the choice of non-probability sampling (York, 1998).

The participants for this particular research were purposively selected from the fourth year social work students of 2011. The sample was accessed through the 4<sup>th</sup> year social work

lecturer who paved the way for an introduction after lectures. These 4th year students were deliberately chosen because of their academic experience and their extensive field work. They were consequently in the best position to judge if their key childhood experiences and other motivations influenced their choice of study. Twenty research participants were included in this research out of a total of twenty eight fourth year students.

### **3.4 Data collection**

#### **3.4.1 Data collection approach**

The nature of the data collection approach employed included in-depth, semi-structured, face-to-face interviews and the researcher's direct observations. Interviewing is the predominant method of data collection and is relevant in qualitative research owing to the fact of the interactional nature of interviews (De Vos et al, 2005). It is concluded by Babbie and Mouton (2001) that interviews are conducted because the researcher is interested in those particular individual's stories.

These interviews were used by the researcher, in order to obtain a detailed picture of the participants' beliefs, values, opinions and perceptions of their defining key experiences and study motivations. The participants were considered to be the expert on their lives and one face-to-face interview was conducted with each subject. The researcher began each interview with the obligatory introductory necessities. For a minority of the participants the actual interviews lasted for approximately one hour. However the majority of interviews were longer than an hour.

Prior to the interviews the researcher requested permission from the Humanities Research Ethics Committee to interview the final year social work students (Appendix A). The students were then required to complete a consent form (Appendix B) and thereafter a semi-structured interview schedule was employed by the researcher (Appendix C). This semi-structured interview schedule enabled the researcher to explore relevant topics that arose during the interview process. De Vos et al (2005) conclude that this will result in the researcher not feeling obliged to rigidly adhere to the scheduled sequence. This feature of qualitative research allows for rich data collection.

### **3.4.2 Data collection apparatus**

With the permission of the participants the researcher used a digital voice recorder during the face-to-face interviews. De Vos et al (2005) state that tape recording of interviews allows for a fuller and more accurate record of the interview than the taking of notes. The recording device enabled the researcher to focus fully on the interviews as well as observe any non-verbal cues from the participants. This recording provided a permanent record of the discourse which was then transcribed in order for analysis to take place. With the use of this recorder the researcher was then able to give her entire attention to the participants without needing to worry about note taking and trying to remember what was discussed.

### **3.4.3 Data analysis**

There are two approaches to qualitative data analysis according to Chambliss and Schutt (2010) and these are inductive, which is the exploratory approach and deductive, which is the hypothesis testing approach. The researcher analyses data using the inductive approach which involves reading through the transcripts and identifying common themes (De Vos et al, 2005). The data analysis approach that was used to analyse the qualitative data is an adaptation of Tesch's (1990) eight stages in De Vos et al (2005). The approach is as follows:

- The researcher will read through all the transcripts to get a sense of the entire interview.
- The researcher will read through one interview at a time and make preliminary notes.
- Themes, topics and ideas will be categorised.
- A list will be made of the topics attached to codes and these codes are written next to the relevant text.
- Descriptive titles are used for each topic.
- Categories are to be abbreviated and codes will be arranged alphabetically.
- All data is then to be assembled and analysed.
- Existing data will be recorded.

## **3.5 Limitations of the study**

Limitations pertaining to the study will be described below:

### **3.5.1 Research design**

The external validity of this study will be low. External validity refers to the generalisability of findings to a wider population (Neuman, 2000). The results of a study will only apply to a small and specific context. It was intended by the researcher that this research is about the University of Cape Town and therefore relevant only to this institution. The university will then be in possession of specific and detailed research that is pertinent to this institution.

### **3.5.2 Sampling**

A sample size of twenty students does not allow for generalising of the findings; however this sample of twenty participants allowed the researcher to have a broad understanding of the students' motivations and of the individuals themselves. A sample of twenty in this case was by far the majority of the final year group and so this sample although not representative to the wider population, adequately covered the experiences of the 4<sup>th</sup> year group. Even though these results will not be able to be generalised to all social work students, this report will highlight the motivations that encourage students to enter into the profession of social work at UCT.

Language was a limitation for some participants for whom English is not their mother tongue, as they may have at times struggled to express their thoughts and experiences. The researcher was cognizant of this fact and gave these students ample time to express themselves fully.

### **3.5.3 Data collection**

Interviewer bias is introduced with the interview method to be used by the researcher. Included here is the research expectancy effect whereby the researcher may subtly convey a certain expectation which the participants then fulfil. Another aspect of interview bias is the social desirability effects, whereby the subjects aim to please the researcher by giving an

account of what they think the researcher may want to hear (De Vos et al, 2005). In the process of trying to eliminate this potential limitation, the researcher posed several questions enquiring about the same experiences, but phrased differently. The researcher used interviewing techniques such as probing, clarification and further questioning to ensure accuracy.

The researcher was aware that physical and social characteristics, for example race, religion, gender, physical appearance, age accent, dress and social class could influence the participants' responses (Babbie & Mouton, 2001). In order to counteract this, the researcher established a good rapport with each participant, thereby counteracting this phenomenon.

### **3.5.4 Data collection apparatus**

The recording of the interview could be a limitation if the participant withholds or limits thoughts and feelings for fear of having them on record (De Vos et al, 2005). However the digital recorder is an excellent tool with regards to the accuracy of content and hopefully a good rapport was established with the participants so that the recorder was forgotten and discussions were fruitful.

### **3.5.5 Data analysis**

There are a number of potential limitations with the data analysis process, including the fact that the transcription of the data is open to human error. There is also potential for bias with the subjectivity of the researcher's interpretation of the data – the data may be overemphasised or even underemphasised or conclusions are drawn that are not accurately supported by the data. This is noted by Babbie and Mouton (2001) as the research selectivity effect. Awareness of these potential sources of bias will contribute towards the data being accepted as trustworthy (De Vos et al, 2005). In order to manage the analysis of data effectively the researcher listened carefully to all the interviews, worked on the individual transcripts thoroughly and identified common themes and categories which allowed for further in depth analysis.

### **3.6 Conclusion**

This chapter presented the research design and methodology. The chapter included the research design, sampling, data collection, data analysis and limitations. Chapter four will discuss the research findings.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### FINDINGS

#### 4.1 Introduction

This penultimate chapter presents and discusses the findings of the research. Firstly it will present a profile of the participants. A table of the framework of analysis will be presented. The key findings will be discussed in relation to the objectives of the research study and thereafter some concluding remarks will complete this chapter.

#### 4.2 Table 1: Profile of the participants

PARTICIPANTS	GENDER	NATIONALITY	CHILDHOOD ENVIRONMENT	PARENT'S' EDUCATIONAL LEVELS	MARITAL STATUS	PARENT'S' WORK/BUSINESS
1	Female	South African	Urban	Degree/Degree	Married	Actuary/Teacher
2	Female	South African	Urban	Degree/Std 8	Married	Teacher/Chef
3	Female	South African	Rural/Urban	Matric/ Std 8	Married	Evangelist/Domestic
4	Female	South African	Urban	Std 8/Std8	Married	Transnet Manager/ Unemployed
5	Female	Zimbabwean	Urban	Std 10	Single parent	Hospital Technician
6	Female	South African	Urban	Matric/Matric	Married	Business owners
7	Female	South African	Township/Rural	Std 6	Divorced	Labourer/Unemployed
8	Female	South African	Rural	Std 7	Single parent	Cleaner
9	Female	South African	Urban	Degree/Matric	Married	Dentist/Housewife
10	Female	South African	Urban	Degree/Matric	Divorced	Doctor/Healer
11	Female	South African	Urban	Matric/Matric	Divorced	Businessman/Teacher
12	Female	South African	Urban	Matric/Matric	Married	Firearm instructor
13	Female	South African	Urban	Std 10/Std 10	Married	Business owners
14	Female	Zimbabwean	Township	Diploma/Std 8	Married	Teacher/Human Resources manager
15	Female	South African	Township	Std 6/Diploma	Married	Business owners
16	Female	South African	Urban	Std 9/Matric	Married	Music Industry
17	Female	South African	Urban	Teaching diploma/Degree	Married	Teachers
18	Female	South African	Urban	Diploma/Diploma	Divorced	Business owners
19	Female	South African	Rural/Urban	Degree/Degree	Divorced	Engineer/Accountant
20	Male	South African	Urban	Matric/Degree	Single parent	Artist/Internet Technology

						Manager
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### 4.3 Table 2: Framework of analysis

THEMES	CATEGORIES	SUBCATEGORIES
<b>Perception of childhood</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Experiences of childhood</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Perceptions and emotional experiences of childhood</li> <li>Negative experiences and the impact thereof</li> <li>Identified strengths in childhood</li> <li>Spiritual beliefs of family</li> </ul>
<b>Defining experiences of childhood</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Defining experiences of childhood and the impact thereof</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Poverty</li> <li>Common childhoods</li> <li>Death of a loved one</li> <li>Divorce</li> <li>Abuse and molestation</li> <li>Mood disorder</li> <li>Loneliness</li> <li>Eating Disorder</li> </ul>
<b>Motivations towards social work</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Motivations and influences towards studying social work</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Altruism</li> <li>Spiritual beliefs</li> <li>Individual experiences</li> <li>Specific incidents</li> <li>Role of significant others</li> <li>Participants' personal needs</li> </ul>
<b>Benefits from studies</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Covert or overt benefits with regards to personal growth</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Insight gained into the self</li> <li>Personal growth from theory and practice</li> <li>The major benefit gained from studying social work</li> <li>Seeking personal healing through social work</li> </ul>
<b>Experience of UCT</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Expectations of university</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Course material</li> <li>Negative perceptions of the department</li> <li>Thoughts of discontinuing their</li> </ul>

		study of social work <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Skills, knowledge, insight, strengths</li> </ul>
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The findings will now be discussed in the forthcoming section using the research objectives as headings.

## **4.4 Objective 1: To investigate the participants’ perceptions of their childhood.**

### **4.4.1 Experience of childhood**

The participants’ perceptions of their childhood are discussed under four subcategories. The first section will focus on the participants’ perceptions and emotional experiences in childhood.

#### **4.4.1.1 Perceptions and emotional experiences of childhood**

Firstly there will be an explanation of the findings of the participants’ perceptions of their key childhood experiences followed by their perceptions of their emotional experiences in childhood.

The findings indicate that the participants’ perceptions of the experiences in childhood was diverse, ranging from carefree and happy to difficult, lonely and sad. Many of the participants experienced both happy and carefree times as well as traumatic, sad and difficult times. The participants described their childhood in the following terms:

**‘I really loved my grandparents I was happy, excited and spoilt... but when I moved in with my parents I didn’t get the attention there, my other siblings teased me. My father was very abusive, very physically abusive and emotionally abusive and that made me not want to get married.’ (Participant 2)**

This quote illustrates how another participant also experienced an emotionally contrasting childhood:

**‘....I was daddy’s girl so we had a close bond, with my mother there was favouritism, my older sister did everything wrong then my second sister did everything right and then I came along and I was just in the shadow. But for my mother I just wasn’t even there.’ (Participant 17)**

The participants were subject to contrasting childhood experiences and many of the difficult experiences such as divorce and death in the family, resulted in distressing consequences. Dysfunction according to Walsh (1993) is a term that refers to an unworkable family where there are numerous symptoms of distress in the home. Some abused children function at a very high level in later life, whilst others function differently. They may develop a chemical dependency or have adjustment problems (Kemp, 1998 and Briere, 1992).

Having a normal childhood says Walsh (1993) can be described as being part of a family that functions well, accomplishes family and individual tasks successfully and individuals are also given the space for personal growth.

The following section focuses on the findings relating to the participants' emotional experiences in childhood.

Some of the participants struggled to find emotive words to describe their childhood feelings; however these feelings when divulged were in the majority of cases both negative and positive. Many of the participants revealed emotions from two different extremes such as a feeling of being carefree and a feeling of sadness, a feeling of safety and a feeling that life is extremely hard. Other emotions experienced included frustration, humiliation, confusion, loneliness and feeling unsafe, loved and secure. Lives changed for the participants that experienced traumatic events within the family system. These feelings are reflected in the statements below:

**'My life was for many years very happy as I spent a lot of time with my grandparents and I had a very good relationship with my father, but he was working a lot and when my grandparents died there was a loss because I couldn't get out of the house and then life became really difficult, I felt very sad then...ja.'**  
(Participant 4)

**'The first part of my life was very contented, protected, safe and then with the divorce it brought a lot of anger, resentment but I kept it all in.....later I felt uncontrolled, unpredictable and unsafe, unprotected and unhappy.'** (Participant 11)

This participant concluded that:

**'It was quite lonely and later on it was exhilarating because I came into my own and I felt quite passionate about things, I had friends and felt that I could change the world. The first part was made up of a little bit of shame, of disliking myself and wanting to change myself and also guilt.'** (Participant 10)

The findings concur with Goldenberg and Goldenberg (2008) who state that the family is greater than the sum of its parts and that change in one area will result in change within the entire system. Grotevant (1989) is of the opinion that families tend to change, adapt, constrain, recruit, mediate, indoctrinate, develop and act through individual family members and because of this there may be both good and bad times for the family.

Dysfunction or trauma experienced by any family member should be understood within the context of the entire system, rather than separate individuals (Freeman, 1992). The participants mostly experienced a duality of emotions resulting from changes that occurred within the family system. The stresses experienced, often brought about by a change in the system resulted in the participants feeling unsafe, unprotected, angry, uncontrolled, lonely, guilty and humiliated.

#### **4.4.1.2 Negative events in childhood and the impact thereof**

The participants, who revealed negative events in their childhood, reported that they were greatly affected by these negative experiences. The negative events which emanated from within their family of origin took the form of family stress, financial problems, death in the family and difficult family relationships.

**'The death of my brother was a very negative event for the family.....I felt as though I didn't have any control over my life at that time....it was such a sad time, everyone was so sad, I struggled to function ...it was horrible.'** (Participant 12)

This finding concurs with Dyregrov (1998) who says that some of the typical grief reactions from children include anxiety, sleep difficulties, sadness, vivid memories, guilt and anger. Surviving children lose a playmate and may also lose parental care and attention for a time. The death of a child causes a huge strain on the family and can result in the parents drifting apart or becoming conflictual which will further impact the child.

The interests and strengths of the participants explored below illustrate how these characteristics link the participants to a caring profession in later life.

### **4.4.1.3 Strengths identified in childhood**

Many of the participants, showed early evidence that the strengths they possessed inclined them towards a caring profession. It is interesting to note that many participants in childhood fulfilled roles that a social worker might have fulfilled, including a predisposition towards helping those in need. The findings indicated that other than the characteristic of nurturing and caring for others, the majority of participants revealed strengths including resilience, good listening skills, compassion, perseverance and the ability to engage with people. The following quotes are an illustration of the above:

**‘.....even in my childhood I was particularly resilient and compassionate. I have always felt deeply for people....I’ve always volunteered mainly with children. I’ve had a plan for myself since I was twelve years old.....that’s why I knew I was going to end up in a caring profession.’ (Participant 13)**

**‘At about age 16, I realised that people wouldn’t take notice of homeless people, I noticed this a lot specially going to a kind of wealthy school I felt it was a great unkindness to not notice others who were suffering and that sparked my interest in other people and trying to save the world.’ (Participant 20)**

**‘.....I was quiet generous when I was little and quite intuitive and I would befriend those left out like the fat kid. I would just listen to others that I felt needed to talk.....’ (Participant 15)**

The findings are supported by Earle (2008) who notes that individuals enter into the profession of social work for a wide range of motivations, notably because of their awareness of the needs within their own communities and primarily because of the desire to help others. Many social workers report taking on caretaking roles within their families, during their childhoods (DiCavacco, 2002 and Dell, Crafter, de Abreu and Cline, 2010). This appears to be the case for the participants who cared for others whilst in childhood and then entered into a caring profession.

The majority of participants were in families that were spiritual or religious and this possibly encouraged their desire to study social work.

#### **4.4.1.4 Spiritual beliefs in the family**

The majority of participants revealed that religion played an important part in their childhood. A sizable number of participants revealed that religious beliefs were very strongly upheld in their family conversely a very small minority said that religion played no part in their upbringing. The beliefs upheld by the participants are portrayed in the following quotes:

**‘Very much, we are a Christian family so it was strongly held....it’s a big part of who I am. I can’t imagine my life without God or even being in a family where there is not a strong faith. My whole life I’ve known God and exactly what I wanted to do there’s no point in life if you can’t help other people.....’ (Participant 14)**

**‘I have a very strong belief in God and Jesus – yes religion is a big part of my life and it probably also influenced my decision to do social work’. (Participant 7)**

**‘Ja religious beliefs were very strongly held in our family, we did all things in the church....’ (Participant 5)**

Spiritual beliefs strongly determine career choice. In their research it was discovered that one of the main purposes of the participants was that of serving others, concluding that there is a link between spiritual beliefs and social work (Lips-Wiersma & Silva, 2000).

Singletary, Wilson, Myers and Scales (2006) conclude that social work is both a vocation and a career with the emphasis on purpose and service to others. ‘Vocation’ means that the individual is not only drawn to a particular profession but the individual is drawn to serve in faith based as well as nonspiritual institutions. Students articulated that they were doing what God was leading them to do and referred to social work as a calling rather than a career (Wilson & McCrystal, 2007).

This section discussed the findings related to the first research objective. The findings revealed that the participants had childhoods that had both positive and negative experiences and the negative circumstances greatly impacted their lives. The participants identified numerous personal strengths including perseverance, resilience, compassion and an interest in people. Spirituality was found to be a prevailing theme in most participants’ childhoods which motivated them towards the study of social work.

## **4.5 Objective 2: To explore three defining experiences that impacted their childhood and possibly influenced their choice of social work as a profession**

All participants identified key experiences that impacted their childhood with several conjoint themes, all of which affected the participants differently.

### **4.5.1 Defining experiences of childhood and the impact thereof**

Of the defining experiences identified, there were both negative and positive experiences. The common experiences were poverty, common or usual childhoods, death, divorce, abuse, mood disorders and loneliness and finally eating disorders. The participants experienced these events in unique ways.

#### **4.5.1.1 Poverty**

Poverty was difficult for the five participants who experienced it. The main cause of their poverty was single parenthood or simply the poor earning power of the caretakers. These quotes are examples of how the participants experienced poverty and how it impacted their lives:

**'.....my mother was a single parent and a lot of the time she was unemployed and life was tough we were poor and this was hard.....I am still dealing with some of the effects of that time even today.'** (Participant 8)

**'Growing up my family also really struggled with money, at times there was absolutely no money and coming from the environment that we did it was rather humiliating.'** (Participant 3)

In South Africa poverty is a multifaceted phenomenon and exists alongside of significant wealth (Cohen, 2010). The actual experience of poverty is multidimensional and one of the main experiences of being poor is a sense of powerlessness and this feeling is compounded when combined with gender power relations. Poverty engenders a feeling of constant emotional stress, continuous poor health, anxiety and difficult, often hazardous work for meagre remuneration (May, 2000).

The effects of poverty can be vast and pervasive and can negatively impact on the health of children. Poverty affects the ways in which parents monitor their children and respond to

their needs in general. Poverty also minimises parent's ability to socialise children in ways that are beneficial to their well-being. Where the parent's physical and emotional health is poor, for the children there is a dearth of learning opportunities and other potentially positive experiences (Guo and Harris, 2000 & Eamon, 2001).

#### **4.5.1.2 Death of a loved one**

Many of the participants also experienced the death of a loved one, namely a grandparent, a sibling or a family pet. These bereavements impacted not only on the participants but on the entire family as is evident in these quotes.

**'In grade eleven my grandfather died, then my puppy died shortly thereafter and then my brother left for varsity and then I experienced depression.....I just didn't know how to deal with all the changes.....that was also when my parent's marital problems began which was an added problem for us to deal with.'** (Participant 18)

**'My brother's death was very sad and difficult to deal with he inspired me a lot and told me he was going to be an accountant one day but the impact of this was that my mother's depression, she was emotionally distant and my sister was also distant after my brother's death, everyone went their own way so I felt lonely, unhappy ....'** (Participant 12)

This finding is similar to Dyregrov (1998) who concludes that when there is a death of a child or a sibling there is a resulting effect on the emotional climate in the home. Parents may display heightened anxiety, lack of energy, guilt and over protected behaviour all of which impacts the child.

Children at different stages of life perceive death differently. Children between the ages of 7 and 11 begin to understand the permanence of death, pre-pubertal children tend to understand death in abstract terms and adolescents can become captivated with the death experience and may question the concept of fairness and the meaning of life (Morgan & Roberts, 2010).

Divorce was another key theme which emerged in the findings.

### 4.5.1.3 Divorce

Five of the twenty participants interviewed experienced divorce during their childhood. The impact of divorce for these participants was traumatic and this negatively impacted on them in that they were left with feelings of guilt, insecurity and fear.

**‘.....my parents’ divorce, the whole change was too much and I didn’t understand what was happening.....I was a very naughty child and I wondered if I was part of the problem here and I wondered if my naughty incidences affected both of them, I felt guilty and maybe part of the cause of the breakup....’ (Participant 19)**

**‘.....when my parents divorced it made a huge change in my life because we moved away and I left my friends behind, the family dynamics changed.....so it was hugely unsettling and scary.’ (Participant 11)**

This participant expresses a similar sentiment:

**‘.....when my parents divorced it changed my life completely because we moved away, the whole family changed. It was the most difficult time I can remember.’ (Participant 10)**

Generally the divorce process takes place over a period of time and transpires with a great deal of stress and consists of numerous challenges and changes for the children involved. Many children have little preparation for their parent’s separation and consequent divorce. The emotions experienced can include distress, anxiety, anger and shock (Kelly and Emery, 2003; Sandler, Tien, Mehta, Wolchik and Ayers, 2000).

Another defining experience that the participants experienced was abuse and molestation. This will be discussed in the following section.

### 4.5.1.4 Abuse and molestation

Some participants experienced abuse and molestation which took place both inside and outside of the family. The impact of this abuse was severe and long lasting in that the participants were unable to trust people thus resulting in them being exceptionally cautious when endeavouring to enter into relationships. This abuse was also instrumental in

participants being drawn towards a helping profession whereby they could help other people to avoid being subjected to a similar experience.

**'...I was molested when I was thirteen and that was also very much a part of me becoming a social work student. It was someone in the neighbourhood and um... I can't trust everyone, and because I kept it to myself it took me a long time to come to terms with it.....'** (Participant 7)

**'...then I had to learn to live in an environment where my father was very physically and emotionally abusive and that made me not want to get married and it took me a long while to get into a relationship, I just couldn't trust men.....maybe that's why I chose social work to help others not to go through what I did.....'** (Participant 15)

The findings concur with the literature which states that many social work students grow up in an environment where they are subjected to various forms of abuse. Social work students according to DiCaccavo (2002) and Dell, Crafter, de Abreu and Cline (2010) are more likely than other individuals to have experienced abuse in their childhood. This trauma is in part responsible for the participants entering into a caring profession such as social work.

The following section will discuss further difficult life experiences of the participants.

#### **4.5.1.5 Mood Disorders and loneliness in childhood**

Some participants revealed that they suffered from mood disorders in childhood relating to feelings of internalised anger, unworthiness and anxiety. Many of these feelings arose in response to events from within the family that were beyond their control.

**'.....I was diagnosed with depression and went onto medication .....it all goes back to that time with my family that I had a lot of internalised anger, not feeling like I can be in this world as I am and that's not good enough, I felt I needed to be more, I just had a breakdown really everything crashed.'** (Participant 9)

**'When I was seven my parents got divorced and we left Joburg that was traumatic but I dealt with it then after my mom remarried my step father started with the abuse, at first it was verbal and then it became more violent. I don't know what**

**happened to me by this time I was so anxious about everything that had happened that I just shrank away from life and was massively depressed I couldn't get out of bed.....' (Participant 11)**

The findings concur with Barker (2004) who states that a mood disorder can reveal itself as sadness and it can be so severe that it interferes with normal functioning and causes substantial distress. Mood disorders often go unrecognised in families as they are considered normal mood swings in adolescence.

These findings also concur with Sue et al 2003 and Barker (2004) and Heim and Nemeroff (2001) who outline the risk factors for depression discussed in Chapter 2.

The following section relates to the findings of the participants who experienced childhood loneliness.

A sense of loneliness was a key theme in that some participants expressed feelings of isolation and loneliness in childhood. Although these participants desired to have fulfilling relationships they were unable for various reasons to achieve this goal and solitude was the result. The consequences of loneliness were feelings of unhappiness and dissatisfaction. One participant said:

**'...I wasn't close to my cousins until I was older, I would rather read books I isolated myself, I was unhappy.... when I moved to a white school the children thought that I didn't understand English I didn't get on well with the children so I played by myself or with the younger children in grade two.'** (Participant 3)

**'I think because of how our family was, you know with all the fighting between my parents our family was fractured and I didn't really get the attention I needed and yes I felt lonely, especially within the family. Um yes I was a lonely child.'**  
(Participant 7)

Social loneliness results in the deficiency of a network of social relationships and emotional loneliness is associated with a lack of intimate personal relationships (Kirova , 2001; Rotenberg & Hymel, 1999). The implications of chronic loneliness are that various maladjustments can occur, such as depression, alcohol abuse, medical problems and leaving school prematurely (Asher, et al, 2003; Qualter, Brown, Munn and Rotenberg, 2010).

#### **4.5.1.6 Eating Disorders**

Other defining experiences, revealed by some participants include the onset of an eating disorder. The eating disorders of these participants appeared to develop after a stressful event in the family. This is how two participants described their experience:

**'.....everyone was thinking my eating disorder was about body image but it wasn't it was about this perfectionist control freak nature that I had after the trauma I experienced after the divorce it was such a confusing time having to look after my mother like that.....'** (Participant 18)

**'.....I felt invisible and my grandmother passed away and so it was a very stressful time for the family and this is when I also developed an eating disorder, then my life just seemed to be spinning out of control....'** (Participant 2)

The findings correspond with Sue et al (2003) in that family dysfunction has been consistently implicated in the pathogenesis of eating disorders and that families are implicit in precipitating or maintain this disordered eating pattern. Eating disorders in children are multifactorial in nature with genetic, biological, psychological, familial and socio cultural associated factors. Substance abuse, being overweight, depression and low self-esteem are also factors associated with eating disorders (Rosen, 2003; Polivy & Herman, 2002).

This section featuring the challenging experiences of childhood will be followed by the findings that depicted a common or usual experience of childhood as experienced by some participants.

#### **4.5.1.7 Common or usual childhoods**

In contrast to the above challenging experiences namely poverty, the death of a loved one, divorce, abuse, mood disorders, loneliness and eating disorders in childhood. The following participants referred to defining moments in their childhood that could be categorised as basically common or usual.

**'I had a stable childhood and I was always supported by both my mom and dad, my dad was always very affectionate and we have a great relationship....I felt very safe and loved as a child. When I broke my arms my mom was amazing, she**

**washed me and cared for me and we grew together, we are a very close family.....'**  
(Participant 13)

The finding concurs with Montgomery et al (2003) that there are socio-political conditions that impact on childhood and a normal childhood is characterised by relative affluence, family stability, good health and good education such as evidenced in this defining experience.

From this section it is evident that for some participants their childhood was generally happy with few negatively impactful experiences. However as depicted in the above section, it is abundantly evident that many participants' childhoods included significantly negative experiences.

#### **4.6 Objective 3: To ascertain if any other life experiences, needs or motivations influenced the students' desire to study social work**

The findings revealed that there were multiple experiences, needs and motivations that drew the participants towards the profession of social work. These findings will now be discussed.

##### **4.6.1 Motivations towards social work**

###### **4.6.1.1 Altruism**

The vast majority of participants in childhood depicted the personality type that is naturally drawn to assisting others in need and took on helping roles in childhood. The participants recognised that these tendencies were instrumental in their being drawn towards social work.

**'I always knew that I wanted to be in the helping profession being highly sensitive I knew I had to help others. In my gap year in the states I met a social worker.....and seeing how rewarding and empowering it was to use your gift to help others helped me decide.....'** (Participant 16)

**'I was always seen as the mother type, looking after people and taking an interest in people's emotional wellbeing.....'** (Participant 4)

**‘.....I realised that I was drawn to help the very disadvantaged people rather than the people who can pay for a psychologist and this is when I went into social work. I knew that I wanted to help people who really needed it.... I think that taking care of my brother for all those years nurtured this empathy.’ (Participant 9)**

This finding is similar to DiCavacco (2002) who concludes that the desire to help others is often the primary motivation for entry into social work. Altruism is undoubtedly a driving force behind helpers’ actions and motives and that they derive a feeling of elation from knowing that they have made a difference (Kottler, 2010). There is amongst the social work students an overwhelming need to help others, a need to make a difference in the lives of others, irrespective of racial and socio-economic factors (Earle, 2008).

#### **4.6.1.2 Spiritual beliefs**

Religion and spiritual beliefs also appear to be factors amongst those who pursued a social work degree. There is a very strong belief system in conjunction with a need to serve humanity. Participants connected their spiritual beliefs and their need to serve together with their purpose in life. This combination led the participants towards social work.

**‘A very strong belief in God and Jesus might have also influenced my decision to do social work as well as just my general need to serve, I see this as my purpose in life.’ (Participant 17)**

**‘We are a Christian family in a charismatic church and it has been this way all my life. I came to realise early in life that I was called to help others, God called me to serve and so social work is perfect for this.’ (Participant 1)**

These findings concur with Wagenfeld-Heintz (2009) and Russel (1998) that spiritual beliefs and values influence the choice of profession. A profession such as social work is seen as an avenue through which individuals can live out their faith. Many students are inspired to serve others because they see it as a calling and that their spirituality improves their personal and professional sense of vocation (Freeman, 2007). Students articulated that they were doing what God had planned for them thereby living out their values in alignment with the values of social work (Singletary et al, 2006).

### **4.6.1.3 The participants' individual experiences**

It is interesting to note that the majority of participants considered other degrees prior to their entry into social work. Few of the final year social work participants, began their university careers with social work as their primary choice. From the findings it was evident that many participants were inspired by the profession of social work through an experience with another person and this subsequently influenced their change of degree.

**'I started out in psychology....I've always been empathetic and been the one that people come to talk to about things....and working in a project in Khayalitsha with children I was so touched by my group and my partner was a second year social work student and she told me about the ethos of social work and how you start at grass roots. I knew then that this is what I wanted to do and this is when I went into social work after two years in psychology. (Participant 9)**

**'I was studying economics and dropped all the business subjects in the first week and went into depression. Then I did volunteer work at a school and talked to the social work student running the group and just knew it was what I wanted to do and I also think that I had a lot of healing to do with the depression and so I thought I could help others and myself.'** (Participant 6)

Many participants came to university to study a different degree, were unhappy and changed to social work. The findings are supported by Freeman (2007) who states that it is evident that the students who entered into social work were not motivated by financial reward and wanted to pursue personal transformation in conjunction with a degree. The social work degree facilitated the personal growth process.

The findings revealed that students have a desire to gather further perspective on their identities. They have a need to determine what is important to them and engage in further personal growth.

DiCavacco (2002) suggests that the need to understand the self is a primary motivation for pursuing social work as a profession. Many individuals look for meaning that is derived from a sense of purpose and working towards the greater good. The participants were seeking greater meaning and changed degrees in order to fulfil this need. Personal transformation involves the development of a greater understanding of one's world and how one sees and experiences oneself and others (Freeman, 2007).

Often times it is the influence of a role model that inspires entry into the profession. From the findings it is obvious that the participants were influenced by a role model in the form of a social worker. Earle (2008)

#### **4.6.1.4 Specific incidents that motivated participants to study social work**

The majority of participants volunteered that they were motivated to pursue social work through the experience of a specific incident such as the death of a loved one. Less important to participants were factors such as the availability of a bursary, the number of points required to be accepted into social work and the knowledge that employment is guaranteed.

**‘When I was five I knew that I wanted to help, maybe it was because of my brother and all his problems and his death. This affected the whole family and as a child I couldn’t understand his pain but as a got older I started to understand and felt a little powerless.... but I always just wanted to help, it’s just part of who I am.’**  
(Participant 12)

**‘.....multiple losses and my sad childhood possibly influenced me to look into social work.....’** (Participant 3)

The findings concur with MacCulloch and Shattell (2009) who conclude that wounded people often seek out places that may offer hope or the possibility of personal healing; this process may be conscious or unconscious. Many individuals may be drawn to a profession or specific roles that hold the promise of providing specific knowledge that could assist with self-healing.

#### **4.6.1.5 The role of significant others in the decision to study social work**

Of the five participants who chose social work as their priority degree on entering university, four were encouraged by their family members to study social work. These four participants grew up in townships or rural areas and were aware of the activities of social workers. The final participant became aware of the activities of social workers through the school and church. The benefits and the status achieved by the social workers in these environments were possibly a factor that prompted this choice of profession.

**'.... we always had social workers in the community when growing up and so my mom said I should do social work. She said that it was a good degree and that as a social worker there will always be work.'** (Participant 5)

**'.....my uncle said it would be a good field to work in specially back home. He said that there is a very big need for social workers in our hometown and the government will pay a good salary for this kind of work. It was good work that the social workers did in the community and in my school.'** (Participant 15)

DiCaccavo (2002) and Earle (2008) note that many social workers were inspired by the receipt of effective social work services in their childhoods and the efficacy of the social worker drew them into the social work arena in later life.

The awareness of the social needs and problems within the students own communities lured both African and coloured students from Stellenbosch University into the profession. They were cognisant of the dearth of social workers within their communities in comparison to the vastness of the social problems.

It was interesting to note the contradiction that exists whereby some family members encouraged the profession of social work and in the following section it is evident that some family members actively endeavoured to discourage the pursuit of social work.

Many of the participants' significant others actively discouraged them from studying social work because of the poor status and remuneration of social workers in South Africa. In some cases both the participants and their significant others possessed negative views of social work and many had an insufficient knowledge of what social work entailed. Despite this active discouragement the participants entered into the degree due to other motivations which took precedence over the family's objections.

**'.....no my parents weren't very happy with my choice of social work. There is a lot of stigma around social work. They were concerned about the pay social workers receive and we weren't really aware of what it was all about.'** (Participant 1)

**'....I was advised against it by my parents, I mean I also knew that it wasn't a prestigious degree but they said it wasn't a great option for employment they said I would never earn enough. So no they weren't very happy about it.'** (Participant 6)

This finding is similar to that of Earle (2008) who also contends that significant others tried to deflect the participants away from social work because of the problems within the social work sector, such as low salaries, poor working conditions and high workloads. They were cognizant of the many challenges within the profession resulting in many social workers being forced to explore other alternatives such as moving abroad or alternately entering into management or education. The image of social work in the past ten years or so has been very poor, resulting in a crisis in the social worker's identity. The status of the profession has been systematically undermined as well as the confidence and ability of the social work profession as a whole (Earle, 2008; DiCavacco, 2002).

Having explored some of the participants' motivations for choosing social work, the following section will focus on the needs of the participants on entry into the university and whether these needs were met.

#### **4.6.1.6 Participants' personal needs on entering University**

Many of the participants revealed that they had personal needs upon entering the University of Cape Town and there was maybe a hope that both their chosen degree and university experience would enable them to meet these needs. These needs included the need for increased personal confidence, the need to meet new friends and to further develop their identities.

**'I was really hoping through the system that there is hope in doing social work.....I also wanted to have a diversity of friends. I think subconsciously I had a need to grow emotionally um.... I was very emotional and scattered before I came.....I just wanted to find myself somehow.'** (Participant 8)

**'I had a need for freedom and friends, um ja I think that's it.'** (Participant 6)

The findings are similar to (Freeman, 2007) who states that students on entering university are motivated by not only by the attainment of a degree but also by the prospect of personal transformation. Students' ability to establish friendships on entering university has an impact on the probability of them completing the degree, whether they are likely to remain at university or terminate their studies (Wilcox, Winn & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005).

The participants' perceptions of any covert or overt personal growth acquired in the process of studying social work will be discussed in the following section.

## **4.7 Objective 4: To determine if the participants have experienced any covert or overt benefits with regards to personal growth from their studies.**

In this section the researcher explores the findings in relation to four areas. These are (1) insight gained into the self (2) personal growth from theory and practice (3) the major benefit received from the study of social work and (4) whether the participants were cognisant of pursuing personal healing through their studies.

### **4.7.1 Insight gained into the self**

The findings reveal that the participant's self-awareness improved with regards to their personality, strengths and the challenges that they had to grapple with. These improved understandings of their 'inner identities' were many and deep. This is how they described the insight gained:

**'... I understand myself much better and I like knowing that I understand people a lot better. I am not a confused child any more I, I understand my mother and father and siblings, now it's great to understand people's behaviour, its helped me in my relationship with people. I have better and stronger relationships I know how to nurture them and look after them, I see myself as a stronger person. I used to have low self-esteem which has now grown and when it comes to relationships my heart is in a safe place. (Participant 1)**

**'For me I used to think that I was shy but I realised that I'm just quiet there are also times when I had to step out of my comfort zone and in my practical I often had to step out of my comfort zone .....I had to learn to be assertive, I had to work on my boundaries and learn that I had to do what I can and accept that I can't rescue them all the time. My personality has changed, I'm stronger now....'**  
(Participant 6)

From the findings it is evident that the participants gained personal growth through the process of studying social work and this concurs with the study conducted by McCulloch and Shattell (2009) which explained that the students, often unconsciously, began the process of self-actualising as a consequence of this study. This appears to be the case with many participants; they gained enormous insight into themselves and in the process moved towards greater self-actualisation. Personal transformation results from the studies

undertaken; however this process for many participants is not just an academic process but also a spiritual one (Freeman, 2007).

#### **4.7.2 Personal growth from theory and practice**

All the participants verified that they had gained from the academic theory and practice both of which are part of the social work course. The majority indicated that the field practice was the arena where most of their personal growth took place.

**‘Absolutely, I think you can’t help anyone unless you examine your own stuff and by examining your stuff you get knowledge about yourself. I see a huge change from when I entered into UCT, now I’m a different person and it’s both the practical and the theory side .....’ (Participant 7)**

**‘Definitely a combination but the studies have given me the theoretical basis to hold onto when I am in the middle of transference or countertransference..... and the practical has grown me by revealing to me the stuff I need to resolve again....’ (Participant 17)**

**‘.....my whole perspective of the world has changed. I am a softer person in some ways in a more positive way; I feel that I can understand people better.....’ (Participant 4)**

This finding is similar to that of Freeman (2007) who found that the students enter into social work in search of meaning and purpose from life and this is attained through personal growth achieved through the theory and practice undertaken in the field. The university and the social work degree in particular could for the student represent a hopeful place where healing and growth can take place (MacCulloch & Shattell, 2009).

#### **4.7.3 The major benefit of the study of social work**

The participants were asked about the one major benefit of studying social work other than the fact that they now have a profession and sixteen of the twenty participants interviewed indicated that their personal growth was the major benefit of this process. Many of the participants felt empowered with their new insight, knowledge and skills. This is how one participant described the experience:

**Growth, personal growth, I'm not the same person any more, I've matured and it's really moulded me.....it will never be a waste even if I don't become a social worker, um, I've become equipped with so many skills that's helped me with my own healing.....it's made me and my life richer whether I do social work or not.'**  
(Participant 16)

Another participant said:

**What it's taught me about people and the skills and my knowing that I can bring about change, I feel that I now have the power to intervene positively.....'**  
(Participant 5)

These findings concur with MacCulloch and Shattell (2009) in that the participants were drawn to an environment and profession that resides with a specific body of knowledge and where there is an opportunity for both insight and healing. Students enter into a profession that will assist them to become more authentic. In this beneficial environment the process of self-actualisation can further develop (Freeman,2007).

#### **4.7.4 Seeking personal healing through social work**

The participants generally acknowledged that in retrospect they were seeking some sort of healing through their choice of social work and on entering social work they were unaware of this need. However having almost completed their studies the participants now realised that they were in need of personal healing and encountered this much needed growth through their experience of studying social work. The minority were aware of this need prior to entering the university.

**'At first I had no idea that this was the case.....that's when I realised that's why I'm here because I am trying to heal myself and its helped. I think I was unconsciously drawn to social work.....'** (Participant 18)

**'Ja I didn't know it then and looking back it definitely helped me to heal some of the issues I had.'** (Participant 20)

This quotation gives evidence of the participants who were previously aware of their need for healing before entering the institution.

**‘I definitely think I knew beforehand that I needed to heal, yes I was wounded and that’s why I went to therapy but I definitely think that the course has hugely added to my healing process and I’m sure also to my effectiveness as a therapist.....’  
(Participant 11)**

The theory of the “wounded healer” refers to individuals who work in the helping professions who have a prior history of “woundedness”. The wounded healer is an individual who works with others and is informed by their difficult past in the work that they do. In searching for cures for their own past difficult experiences, the individual learns to be an effective healer for others. It is often the person’s wounds that are at the root of them becoming an effective healer. Healers tend to connect their past experience to their work with others (Wolfgang, 2010; Jackson, 2001).

All people, no matter their upbringing, are wounded, but many individuals are so totally conditioned by their socialisation that they are not aware of their underlying buried pain. Individuals are drawn towards therapeutic healing because of their painful life experiences and this pain contributes to the therapist’s skills and insight enabling them to become effective professionals (MacCulloch & Shattell, 2009).

The participants’ perception of the insight gained into themselves and the personal growth they accrued from the theory and field practice, was not only invaluable but also life changing. The participants also acknowledged that personal growth was a major benefit of their studies and that they were unconsciously seeking healing on entering into the realm of social work.

A discussion to ascertain whether the participants’ expectations of university have been met, will now follow.

## **4.8 Objective 5: To ascertain whether the participants’ expectations of university have been met.**

### **4.8.1 Course material not promoting progress of participants**

Many of the participants reported that various aspects of the course did not promote their progress. With some of the courses, there appeared to be unnecessary repetition. Some participants were also critical of some of the lecturers and the minority felt that some of the content was not challenging enough. This is what one participant said:

**'There were courses that we did around policy and SADAC and it was the content, it was the lecturers and it was horrible and at the end I felt that I had learnt nothing.....some has been very repetitive.....a lot around policy and the white paper where there was a lot of repetition.....'** (Participant 9)

This participant reported further that:

**'....in general it was a very good course the only real issue I had was that some lecturers weren't dealing with a large enough volume of work or that some stuff was very basic and we never got into the more interesting stuff....sometimes it was not academically stimulating enough for me.'** (Participant 20)

There were participants however, who found that the entire course was pertinent and that no changes were required. They reported that the curriculum and the lecturers met all their academic and professional expectations. One participant stated:

**'Everything I have learnt has really helped, it hasn't been always enjoyable. Yes the course and the lecturers and also the practicals were good, yes I have no problems.'** (Participant 14)

From the findings it is clear that many participants found that the lecturers did not meet their needs. Meyer, Spencer and French (2009) argue that students' interactions with lecturers have a positive relationship with personal development as well as academic achievement. Students' relationships with faculty members establish an important part of their integration into and continuity of academic life (Wilcox et al, 2005).

Another finding was that there appeared to be a split between the interests and motivations of the participants; some were almost exclusively drawn towards community work and others towards casework or groupwork.

**'More community work even psychology tends to deal with the individuals rather than the community. For me there was just not enough, I want to work with the community and it's just not enough .... If I could have gone to more community**

**based placements um um I think I would have learnt a lot more rather than just the clinical.’ (Participant 14)**

In contrast other participants found the community and policy section of the course contrary to their vision and how they wanted to conduct their professional life. This participant stated that:

**‘There seem to be two distinct groups in social work and I am just not one of the community social workers. I can only really see myself doing clinical social work so I found that a bit of a waste of time.... I don’t know.... ja I’m just not interested maybe if I had grown up in those environments but I didn’t.’ (Participant 1)**

Casework, group work and community work are studied at UCT and many participants favoured one or the other and felt very strongly about their preference. In South Africa social work is offered as a generalist degree. This means that students are prepared to work with client groups in numerous settings (Spolander, Pullen-Sansfacon, Brown, Engelbrecht, 2011).

#### **4.8.2 Participants’ perceptions of deficiencies in theory and perceptions of lack of support from the department**

The participants generally spoke of requirements and support that they felt were lacking at UCT. The participants communicated a variety of needs that they felt would have further enhanced their knowledge and experience. Generally participants felt that field practice supervision was sufficient to meet their needs however there were participants who felt that further support was required. The participants also received a lot of support from their parents and friends however felt the support received from their peers was crucial as it was only their peers that were truly capable of understanding what they were going through in terms of theory and practice.

**‘.....it would have been nice in second year to have a support group.....we would have struggled a lot less if there had been a support group of the students with a facilitator to talk through our stuff. We could talk about our social work stuff and personal stuff and work stuff because we all had queries about whether we were making a difference and if we could have just talked about this together we could**

**have learnt so much from each other. Also our colleagues are the only ones who really know what we are experiencing.’ (Participant 3)**

**‘Supervision, mentoring was needed, individual supervision would have benefited me. The group supervision was good but I needed more because at times I had a really hard time and I just needed more help..... I think that maybe many students that left social work maybe would have stayed, I don’t know but at times it’s so hard we just need real personal support. Some students had their own therapy but not everyone can do that.’ (Participant 8)**

These findings concur with Halawah (2006) who states that academic and emotional support from the academic staff and friends on the course is crucial for students. Peers can be instrumental in the circulation of knowledge and skills to each other and this support is critical to overall success at university (Skryme, 2007). This support is even more vital for social work students who deal not only with the academic challenges but also with the emotional challenges of practice. Palmer, O’Kane and Ownens (2009) found in their research that students who studied in groups formed a support for one another and helped each other through difficult times. Course friendships provide key contributory informational support for students (Halawah, 2006).

Another important requirement for the students was effective supervision. This is echoed by Engelbrecht (2004) who states that supervision for social workers is imperative as it encourages self-awareness and enables them to apply their knowledge to practice. An empowerment model applied to supervision can build capacity for the student if there is joint critical, reflective and imaginative thinking and when the student plays an active role in the process (Aldarondo, 2007).

Many participants felt that a particular skill was absent namely the knowledge of basic conversing in an indigenous language. There was a common need to be able to communicate with the clients even if it was in a basic fashion.

**“I definitely think that if Xhosa was a prerequisite for the course it would be so beneficial, we need to be able to communicate even if it’s just basically.’ (Participant 10)**

**‘.....I would have appreciated it if they could have focused on an African language because if I want to work in South Africa I will need to communicate. I have**

**sometimes struggled to communicate with clients, even just a basic knowledge of the language would have been helpful .....’ (Participant 16)**

The findings concur with Earle (2008) who noted that the recently amended four year social work degree (BSW) in 2007, required an African specific knowledge which prepared the students for work in an African environment as opposed to a first world type of environment. Communication is a core function and the context of the eleven languages and cultural diversity make language relevant to all South African social workers. In the social work profession it is acknowledged that individuals favour conversing about their personal problems in their mother tongue (Earle, 2008; Brown & Neku, 2005). Many social workers found that language was a barrier to the ease with which they were able to practice, particularly in rural areas where indigenous languages dominated (Earle, 2008).

The following section explores the participants’ struggle with the stressors of the course and their thoughts of termination.

### **4.8.3 Participants’ thoughts of terminating studies**

The participants indicated that between their first and final years there had been a huge attrition of students from the course. Seventeen of the twenty participants thought of terminating their studies. Only three of the twenty participants interviewed went through the course without any thoughts of termination. The reason for the need to terminate their studies was generally due to the stressors of the course or personal problems that became overwhelming. In a number of cases it was a combination of both.

**‘Yes, yes, yes I thought in third year and I felt I just could not do it, it was both the workload and the practical because it was so emotionally draining....’ (Participant 2)**

**‘Yes I went through a really bad patch at the end of first year. I came out of a very abusive relationship and felt very ashamed about my past and I suddenly wanted to run away. It wasn’t really the work it was just my personal stuff that was hectic and then combine it with the demands of the course....’ (Participant 19)**

**‘I so nearly quit, during my third year. I really came so close, I just couldn’t handle the stress any more, at the time it was just too much.....’ (Participant 13)**

The findings concur with Earle (2008) who found in research that students' personal and family situations impact considerably on their ability to successfully complete the social work degree. Many reasons why students contemplate or actually do terminate their studies include personal social problems, pregnancies, the limited availability of physical and human resource support within the departments of education, the inability to access sufficient finances and support for individual social problems, poverty and the students pursuing the career for the wrong reasons.

#### **4.8.4 Skills, knowledge, personal insight and strengths gained**

The participants generally felt that they had gained the skills, insight, knowledge and strengths necessary for the challenging South African environment. However the participants were generally tentative regarding their possession of these attributes. Although they realised that they were still 'a work in progress' there was a lot of ambivalence about their readiness for the profession.

**'I definitely gained extensive skills and knowledge and insight.....to a certain extent in Cape Town they don't deal with the same problems as we have in other areas with poverty and abandoned kids and I've never had to deal with all this because it's quite affluent here.....in my practicals I was good with children, but in the future I don't know if I do have the strength for the environments where there is all that poverty and all the problems that those people have.'** (Participant 17)

Another participant had this view:

**'Yes and no, it's almost impossible to be prepared for the South African environment, it equips you broadly for everything but not in depth enough. I think social work needs to be split into separate degrees; even in the class the people are very different in their approach to life. The courses will overlap but I feel that separating them would certainly have given me a greater depth in the courses, although I have gained knowledge and skills, I just don't feel I've been taught enough so I don't know, it will be a shock when I go into the world.'** (Participant 12)

The participants were ambivalent about entry into the world of work. There are special hardships associated with the social work profession. The setting in which interventions are practiced bring with it overwhelming and tragic stories. Social workers particularly in the beginning will carry the burdens of feelings of inadequacy as well as discrepant feedback

from supervisors, books and colleagues. Stress in the profession is significant in that there is not only client induced stress, but work environment stress, self-induced and event induced stress. Other stresses facing the helper are fatigue, burnout, isolation and a lack of money (Kottler, 2010).

In examining objective 5 several issues were explored namely, the course material which did not promote the participants' progress, as well as the participants' perceptions of deficiencies in theory and the perceived lack of support in the faculty. This objective also explored how the participants struggled with the stressors of the course as well as an exploration of the skills, knowledge, personal insight and strengths gained by the students throughout the course.

## **4.9 Conclusion**

This chapter presented the research findings. The findings were discussed using the research objectives as a framework. The final chapter will present the conclusions and recommendations.

University of Cape Town

## CHAPTER FIVE

### CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

#### 5.1 Introduction

The final chapter discusses the main conclusions and recommendations reached from the research findings. Recommendations to the Department of Social Development and for future research will be offered in conjunction with the conclusions.

#### 5.2 Conclusions

The conclusions of the research will be discussed using the research objectives as headings.

##### 5.2.1 Objective 1: To investigate the students' perception of their childhood.

It is interesting to conclude from the participant's childhoods that many had a positive, namely happy and carefree childhood, contrasted with negative experiences which brought about feelings of sadness, anger, humiliation and shame. This links to the literature that childhood can be a positive experience but can however also comprise of many difficult circumstances.

It can be concluded that the participants experienced events in childhood that emanated from within the family of origin, eg. death as well as events from the external environment such as molestation. The participants perceived and experienced both the family and the environmental experiences as painful.

There was significant inclination by the participants to help others and to volunteer from early on in life. They also perceived their strengths to include characteristics such as resilience, compassion, perseverance, engaging with people and good listening skills. It is interesting to note that these characteristics co-exist with established social work values.

The participants had various views with regards to spirituality and religion. There were families where beliefs were very strongly held and then other families which did not hold any particular religious or spiritual beliefs. This phenomenon is documented in the literature which states that religion and spirituality can be a powerful motivation for career choice (Lips-Wiersma and Silva 2000).

## **5.2.2 Objective 2: To explore three defining childhood experiences that impacted the students and conceivably influenced their choice of social work as a profession.**

It can be concluded that loneliness and isolation was experienced by some participants during childhood. This loneliness was a defining experience of their childhood. The literature states that for various reasons loneliness is not an uncommon experience in childhood.

A defining experience for some participants was that they experienced a usual or common childhood, which was defined by relative affluence, family stability, good health and good education.

For those participants who grew up in poverty it was a key experience of their childhood years. Their experience of poverty resulted from either growing up in a single parent household or from the poor earning power of their caretakers (Cohen, 2010).

For some of the participants the death of a significant other impacted the entire family enormously. The literature cites that this defining experience of death in childhood can result in the participants experiencing disorders such as eating or mood disorders and a sense of isolation or loneliness (Dyregrov, 1998).

It can be concluded that divorce in the family impacted negatively on the participants. This experience was most definitely a defining experience for the participants and left them with feelings of distress, anxiety, shock, anger and disbelief (Kelly and Emery, 2003; Sandler, Tien, Mehta, Wolchik & Ayers, 2000).

For the participants who were the victims of abuse, which took place both inside and outside the home, this was a key experience of their childhoods. The emotional and social consequences of this abuse, ranged from mild to severe but was always detrimental (Gelles and Lancaster, 2005).

Some participants suffered from mood disorders in their childhoods which they say emanated from feelings of internalised anger, feelings of unworthiness and anxiety. Generally this key childhood experience resulted from an event in their lives over which they had no control such as divorce in the family or internal feelings of unworthiness resulting from other traumatic childhood experiences.

For the participants who succumbed to an eating disorder it was a defining childhood experience. This disorder often developed as a result of a stressful event within the family, resulting in the participants attempting to gain control through their control of food intake.

The participants had numerous negative and positive events and experiences during their childhoods and these experiences defined who they were as young adults and in many cases influenced their gravitation towards social work.

### **5.2.3 Objective 3: To ascertain if any life experiences, needs or motivations influenced the students' desire to pursue the study of social work.**

It can be concluded that individuals who have altruistic tendencies such as empathy, are generally those who are motivated to study social work. The participants' altruistic characteristics included being of a sensitive nature, wanting to help or empower others, having empathy and possessing a nature that is nurturing. These values are consistent with social work values.

A very strong spiritual belief system in conjunction with a need to serve humanity as well as understanding that serving is their life's purpose motivated some participants towards social work.

It is interesting to note that it was only a minority of participants who chose social work as their primary degree. The majority of participants entered into UCT with the intention of studying a different degree such as psychology or economics. When they found however that their original choice did not meet their needs, only then were they motivated to explore social work as a degree of choice.

Some participants described their childhood experiences as the motivation to pursue the profession of social work. Specific incidents or events such as having a family member with massive challenges was instrumental in guiding the participants towards the study of social work

It can be concluded that significant family members and friends encouraged some participants to attempt social work. Certain participants experienced or observed the positive interventions of social workers in their communities and this influenced them in the direction of social work.

In contrast to this there were also a number of participants who were deflected or actively discouraged from choosing social work as a career by parents who were

concerned about the negative stigma attached to the profession as well as the anticipated low remuneration.

The participants on entering UCT had certain needs such as the need for increased personal confidence and the need to meet new friends. These needs may have in some way motivated them towards attaining a degree which would promote their confidence and immerse them in a world where they would meet many people.

#### **5.2.4 Objective 4: To determine if the participants have experienced any covert or overt benefits with regards to personal growth.**

The participants gained both covert and overt benefits from the social work process. The participants perceived that they gained insight into their personalities, strengths and on-going challenges. The insights into their 'inner identities' were both numerous and insightful.

The participants were of the opinion that their personal growth was amplified through exposure to the theoretical and practical aspects of the social work course.

The participants reached the conclusion that incredible personal growth was the major benefit experienced from their study of social work. Many of the participants were empowered with new insight into themselves as well as enhanced knowledge and skills.

By far the majority of the participants felt that the greatest advantages stemming from the social work course were personal growth and insight. The participants generally acknowledged that they did in retrospect enter into social work in order to attain personal growth and healing resulting from their childhood experiences. It is therefore evident that both the covert and the overt benefits of the social work course, greatly added to the participants overall personal development.

#### **5.2.5 Objective 5: To ascertain whether the students' expectations of university have been met.**

The participants were of the opinion that the repetition of courses, certain styles of lecturing and content that was sometimes not sufficiently stimulating, were aspects of the course that did not meet their expectations and needs.

For a minority of participants the entire course met their expectations and no changes were required.

It is interesting to note that there was a split amongst the participants; some participants were drawn exclusively towards clinical social work and others favoured community social work. Both groups would have preferred a greater emphasis on their choice. In this regard, it appears that their expectations were not met.

Participants had an expectation that they would interact more with their colleagues in a facilitated support group format. Mentoring, in the form of a personal supervision resource, which could be accessed as required, was lacking for many participants.

It can be concluded that many participants had an expectation that communication in the field would be straightforward and uncomplicated. However when they entered the practical field, the participants felt that they lacked basic communication skills when engaging with some clients and that a basic knowledge of Xhosa would have allowed for more productive interactions. The literature confirms that language can be a barrier to effective communication.

It was enlightening to discover that approximately half of the participants had at one time or another during the course of their studies seriously thought about terminating their degree because of both personal problems and the stressors emanating from the theory and field practice.

The participants were ambivalent with regards to their preparedness for work in the social work arena. The majority recognised that although they had gained skills, knowledge and insight they were still uncertain as to whether they were adequately prepared to enter into the challenging South African environment. In this regard they felt unsure as to whether their expectations had been sufficiently met.

## **5.3 Recommendations**

Based on the findings and the main conclusions of this study the following recommendations are proposed.

### **5.3.1 Recommendations for the Faculty of Humanities**

It is recommended that the faculty spends more time, from the commencement of the course to explore the life experiences of the students. This could be conducted in a small group forum whereby the students can also get to know each other. A roving facilitator would be required to encourage the students to communicate their emotions relating to their childhoods. Through integrating with like-minded

individuals, the students could solidify their identities and attempt to resolve many of the emotional issues they carried from childhood.

The type of environment mentioned above, could also meet the needs of the students with regards to their wanting to connect with their peers on a deeper level, their needs to assemble a support system and their need to make new friends. Peers would also be able to offer each other academic and emotional support as well as information and experience from the field practice. This type of practice could ultimately also assist the students in developing their confidence levels at the university and in life in general. Owing to the fact that this occupational stress is so potentially hazardous for the student's emotional well-being the support that emanates from this forum could have the added benefit of keeping students in the course, thus slowing the enormous attrition rate.

An environment where students can explore their motivations for entering social work is recommended as this could clarify whether further personal growth work is required. This forum could form part of the curriculum and would need to be on-going throughout first year. If required the facilitator could recommend psychological intervention for students who have needs that are beyond this forum. It is understood that UCT is primarily an institution of higher learning and not a therapeutic environment. However in order to decrease the attrition rate in such a vitally necessary profession such as social work, the needs and expectations of the students must be taken into consideration. The BSW degree is incredibly challenging because the students need to not only achieve academically, but they need at a young age to develop a deep understanding of themselves, their personalities, strengths and challenges. Added to that the students then also need to be able to handle situations that are emotionally challenging and deal with very disturbing circumstances. The development of this personal insight takes time and work and in order for the optimal number of students to succeed, they require greater assistance from the department than is generally required from most other faculties.

Courses need to be rearranged and strategically placed in the programme so that the students learn vital knowledge prior to their field placements so that this knowledge can be utilised.

A workshop dealing with stress and coping strategies could be conducted in the first year and then repeated on an on-going basis as the students become involved in field practice. These workshops would need to be tailored towards the students' current needs and their present circumstances. Many students face the challenge of leaving home for the first time, entering into a new environment and having reduced academic, social and family support. These challenges combined with the academic

workload, the field practice and the necessity to develop and mature within themselves, brings with it stressors that the vast majority of participants found extremely daunting. This often resulted in the participants having thoughts of terminating their studies.

### **5.3.2 Recommendations for the University**

The careers guidance department could, during orientation, encourage those researching or considering a humanities degree to consider registering for a social work course as part of their subject choices. The students would thereby be inadvertently exposed to a course which they may not have considered because of the negative sentiments attached to social work.

It is evident that many students are unsure as to their career path. Guidance could be advertised on campus and announced in some lectures. This could encourage the students who are uncertain about their degree of choice to consult the career guidance specialist at the first inkling of dissatisfaction. Alternately it could confirm for the students that they have chosen correctly.

The students' personal history has a profound influence on the student which in turn impacts on the university and the turnout of competent professionals. The implications of this phenomenon for the university are that various practices, if put in place will assist the students to not only achieve optimally but will hopefully enable many more social work students to graduate.

### **5.3.3 Recommendations for the Department of Social Development**

The curriculum needs to be scrutinised in order to eliminate repetition of courses. This will allow for further course development in areas required by the students.

It is vital for the department to ensure that the appropriate lecturers are recruited to the department in order to encourage students to continue to their final year.

There were two distinct groups in the final year class; those who were primarily interested in clinical work and those who were focused on community work. Both groups felt that greater focus was required for their particular field of interest. A deeper understanding of their particular social work field could assist them to feel sufficiently equipped to enter the world of work. In order to meet this need the department could design the first three years as a generalised degree. This would enable the students in their final year to focus on their particular field of interest.

Basic communication skills in an African language would be beneficial to the students who are unable to communicate in an African language, not only during field practice but also thereafter when they qualify into the profession. The knowledge of basic communicating skills could further increase their professional confidence and could highlight the benefits of community work to a greater number of social work students.

Although the students on the whole felt that their supervisors were skilled, there were those that required further assistance and felt that further mentoring would provide the required support. A mentoring facility, provided by the University, could offer support to students who are feeling overwhelmed and considering discontinuing their studies. This additional facility would however result in additional cost to the university.

### **5.3.4 Recommendations for future research**

A comparative study between the retention rate of social work students from the University of Cape Town and other universities could be engaged in, to discover if there are any notable differences. The research would need to then examine the aspects of the course responsible for the greater retention of students.

The relationship between the need to enter into social work and the conscious need for students to pursue personal growth could be further researched by directing the research towards this focus and further exploring the wounds that students have from their childhoods.

There is a possibility of research into the link between the students in childhood engaging in adult roles, chores and acts of helping through necessity and how these acts extended into adulthood through the choice of social work, which requires re-employing similar roles to which the children undertook in childhood.

## **5.4 Conclusion**

The final chapter has presented the main conclusions from the research. Recommendations were proposed to the Faculty of Humanities and the university to further assist the students to persevere through the challenges of the social work course. Future research recommendations were also noted.

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University of Cape Town

## **APPENDICES**

## **APPENDIX A: Letter to Humanities Research Ethics Committee**

**Attention:** Executive Director – Student Affairs for Students

Social Work/Humanities Research Ethics Committee

**Date:** 20/05/2011

**From:** Bridget Rawlins RWLBRI003

**Department:** Faculty of Humanities

**Degree:** Master of social science in clinical social work

### **TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN**

I hereby submit my research proposal and request permission to access a sample of the social work final year students for my research dissertation. My intention is to employ a qualitative research design and to interview approximately twenty students, all outside of class time, at a suitable venue.

The purpose of this research relates to the fact that the profession of social work was declared a scarce national skill in 2005, and despite this declaration the numbers of social workers in the field is continuing to decline and so the national requirement for social workers falls drastically short of the need.

Another issue that impedes this fulfilment of the optimal quota is the attrition of social workers in the academic phase. The purpose of this research is to establish what motivations/experiences/needs the students enter into social work with and to establish if the Department of Social Development is meeting these needs through the curriculum and programmes, thereby halting the attrition of this valuable national resource.

My research objectives are as follows;

- To investigate in general the student's perceptions of their childhood.
- To explore three defining experiences that may have impacted their childhood and possibly influenced their choice of social work as a profession.

- To ascertain if any other life experiences, needs or motivations influenced the student's desire to study social work.
- To determine if the students have experienced any covert or overt benefits with regards to personal growth from their studies.
- To ascertain whether the UCT environment, the social work degree and the field work have met the needs of the student.

I have considered all the ethical considerations and am under the supervision by a staff member in the Department of Social Development.

I am of the opinion that the Faculty of Humanities will benefit from the findings of this report and be able to use the findings to the benefit of the Department of Social Development and the students.

I await your reply in this regard.

**BRIDGET RAWLINS**

University of Cape Town

## APPENDIX B: Research Consent Form.

I agree to participate in the Masters Research Project titled: **Final year social work students at the University of Cape Town: Perceptions of key experiences and motivations that influenced the subsequent decision to study social work.**

The aim of the project has been explained to me. I understand the following:

- That my participation is voluntary.
- That the data I will provide will be used for research purposes only.
- That my name will not be used in any seminars or publications resulting from the research.
- That the interview will be recorded.

**Participant:** .....

**Researcher:** Bridget Rawlins

Signature:.....Signature:.....

Date:..... Date:.....

## **APPENDIX C: Interview schedule**

Thanks for your offer to participate in the research

Signing of the consent form

### **Family background and ecosystemic environment**

- Where did you grow up? Establish province, town, city, suburb, informal settlement.
- Tell me about your home and your family – parents, siblings, step family, extended family.
- Can you tell me about your caregiver's employment/ work? Probe for their school educational levels and if appropriate university levels of the caregivers.
- How would you describe your experience of your childhood?
- How did your childhood 'feel'? Give feeling/emotive words.
- Describe three defining experiences of your childhood. Can be both positive and negative.
- What was the impact of these experiences?
- What or who motivated you towards social work?
- Were there any negative influences in your life? How did these negative influences affect your life?
- Growing up what did you identify as your interests and strengths?
- When did you recognise that you were motivated to help people?
- How strongly were religious /spiritual beliefs held in your family?

### **University experience**

- What degree options did you consider prior to applying to the university?
- What initially drew you towards social work in particular? Point requirements, bursary, friends doing the degree, religious beliefs, altruism, a specific incident, the knowledge that employment is guaranteed, influence from significant others.

- Did you ever seriously consider quitting your studies? If so why – money problems, course too challenging, course no longer of interest to you, social problems, friends quitting, struggled to cope emotionally with the problems/issues you witnessed, other.

### **Individual motivations and needs**

- Through the experience of the social work course have you gained insight into your own personality, strengths and challenges?
- What if any personal needs had you identified for yourself on entering UCT?
- When you began working in the field were there any issues/people/circumstances that emotionally challenged you?
- Do you feel that you have grown personally through being exposed to your studies and practical work? If yes, how?
- What aspect of the social work course did you feel did not promote your journey towards personal growth?
- What could the course have included that would have positively promoted your further growth?
- What if anything in the course has hampered your growth?
- What emotional aspect has been the most difficult to deal with in your study of social work?
- Who has helped you through the challenges at university? Friends, family, peers, partner, university staff, professional help.
- Did the study of social work/ psychology expose issues that you had previously blocked?
- What for you personally was the major benefit of studying social work? (other than you will have a profession at the end of your studies)
- Do you feel that UCT and its environment and the social work course have met your specific needs to be thoroughly skilled, to have the necessary knowledge and personal insight and strength for the South African scenario?