

# JOURNAL OF HUMAN BEHAVIOUR & DEVELOPMENT ISSUES

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- COMMUNITY PSYCHOSOCIAL RESEARCH (COMPRES): A NEW RESEARCH FOCUS AREA FOR COMMUNITY RESEARCH AT THE NORTH-WEST UNIVERSITY IN SOUTH AFRICA
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## JOURNAL OF HUMAN BEHAVIOUR AND DEVELOPMENT ISSUES

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## Community Psychosocial Research (COMPRES): A New Research Focus Area for Community Research at the North-West University in South Africa

Herman Grobler\*

In a country like South Africa where the majority of people do not have access to psychological support services the psychological needs of people are not known and these needs need to be investigated. However, as individuals do not function in isolation, it is also important to investigate these needs within their social context, relating social conditions to mental health. Therefore, psychosocial research can play an important role in this process of investigation. The tendency of people to function within a social context, makes it logical to conduct research on individuals within specific communities where social context is taken in consideration. Furthermore it does not always seem effective to address needs from one discipline only, as a psychological need for example may often be linked to social and or educational needs as well. Psychosocial research cross the boundaries of singular disciplinary approaches and provides the opportunity for individuals, families and communities to be exposed to a broader spectrum of expertise.

In 2013 a need was expressed by the Deans of the Faculty of Health Sciences and the Faculty of Education, North-West University, Potchefstroom in South Africa to establish a research entity in which researchers, who mainly work in the context of mono disciplinary research, could start collaborating in a multidisciplinary capacity. Additionally, in the light of the importance of community engagement, it was decided that the new entity should mainly focus on community research. A task team was formed and a process of planning and refinement was initiated. At the end of 2014 the idea became a reality when the Senate of the University approved the application. In January

2015 COMPRES officially became operationalised as a research focus area.

Research in COMPRES focuses on human behaviour within a community context from the scientific perspectives of Psychology, Social work and Education. The vision of COMPRES is to conduct high quality, scientific and evidence-based research on community psychosocial wellness in appropriate South African contexts, with the aim to prevent pathology and improve psychosocial well-being. In addition, the researchers within COMPRES want to establish ourselves as leading role players in community psychosocial research in the wider Southern Africa region, and in doing so develop and provide appropriate models for understanding and addressing community psychosocial adversity and wellbeing within a developing context.

The focus on community engagement is especially relevant and in line with the constant need of academics and researchers to become more involved in communities, not only by means of voluntary work, but to bring back the knowledge from the communities, integrating it with teaching-learning and research, and responding to the communities by ploughing the knowledge back into communities. The research climate in South Africa is constantly changing and the need for community research has been voiced louder and louder. The North-West University is moving towards a greater focus on community engagement where the latter forms an overarching umbrella over research and teaching-learning. There is a need for researchers and lecturers to become actively involved in research processes that move beyond boundaries of specific disciplines and communities. One opportunity that presented itself was to motivate researchers in the three sections of Psychosocial Behavioural Sciences (Psychology and Social work), The Centre for Child, Youth and Family Studies

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(researchers in Social work, Psychology and Education) and Education Studies to work together in bigger research projects where the impact in the community could be of greater significance than smaller scientific studies. The culture of multidisciplinary research has not been settled within these disciplines and in that lies the opportunity for COMPRES. Although these three sections are all part of the North-West University, the Centre for Child, Youth and Family studies (CCYF) is situated in the Western Cape Province, more or less 12 000kms away from the main campus. However this also provides the opportunity for colleagues to work across provinces and to conduct comparative research. Currently COMPRES consists of a team of registered psychologists, educationists and social workers with researchers ranging from junior researchers to senior researchers, rated with the National Research Foundation (NRF).

Although a very young focus area, the first publications have already been published and exciting projects are either running, or are in the process of development. Some of the existing projects are:

- Action research for community engagement and community based educational research;
- Promotion of psycho-social well-being in South African school communities;
- Training resilience through Eco-Adventure;
- Biopsychosocial well-being interventions for individuals, groups and communities;
- Evidence based forensic assessments.

New projects in the process of approval are for example:

- The strengthening families, strengthening communities project;
- Y-PAR: giving marginalised youth a purpose;
- HIV prevention through a gender lens;
- Mentoring project;
- Structured intervention programs.

The challenge for COMPRES now is to involve the researchers across disciplines in the different projects, to invite international researchers to become involved, and by doing that, enhancing the impact of the studies in the broader research community and creating opportunities for funding.

COMPRES stands for a research entity where the expertise of the community is acknowledged and integrated into the research process and where participant contributions are valued and incorporated during various stages of the research process. The dream is for COMPRES to become a home for emerging researchers, researchers and established researchers, as well as the community members who are part of the projects and those who would like to become part of initiatives within COMPRES. Although it is important for the researchers of COMPRES to do conduct scholarly research that will change the lives of individuals, families and communities, these changes cannot occur from one dimensional relationships where researchers in COMPRES are seen as life savers. Reciprocal relationships are needed between the researchers who act as representatives of the University and the community itself, within which they work together towards better circumstances and opportunities. COMPRES will form the glue between the university and communities in building reciprocal relationships where both parties benefit.

Furthermore COMPRES has begun to build relationships and commit to partnerships. Some of these partnerships include governmental organisations, e.g. the National Department of Education, the Department of Social Development and the Department of Health. Non-governmental organisations are already involved, for example the national Research Foundation, charity organisations and faith based organisations. Thirdly and most importantly are the communities with whom partnerships are important if national policy wants to be dictated. These partnerships carry the voice of the communities and represent the problem areas in environment where the government can make a difference.

The structure of COMPRES is not static and will evolve by means of strategic planning and experience. Researchers who work within mono disciplines need to collaborate and feel secure in an environment that will support and empower them to elicit and develop their potential. The researchers in COMPRES want to contribute to scholarly high impact research on national and international level and contribute to the research community.

The spectrum of results expected from the research conducted in this entity include an advanced understanding, in the South African context, of:

- assessment and evaluation of psychosocial risks, strengths, and forensic cases;
- practices regarding the support of individuals, families and communities through evidence-based interventions to deal with psychological disorders, trauma, adversity and life stress;
- practices regarding the support of professionals who work with individuals and communities in psychosocial need;
- the experiences and dynamics of individuals, families and communities regarding quality of life and well-being;
- support for the enhancement of quality of life and well-being of individuals, families and communities;
- development of innovative and cutting-edge indigenous research methodologies that will

enable researchers to access data in a respectful manner from participants and also to demonstrate academic rigour to develop new knowledge;

- advancing the respective fields of discipline by showing originality and relevance in research outputs; and finally;
- international collaboration as a way to ensure quality and capacity building.

The researchers of COMPRES stand amidst exciting new opportunities and look forward in collaborating on national and international level. We are moving forward with the aim of making a difference and contributing to the broader research community.

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