

FREE Range Reflection

A reflection on the FREE Range scholarship program in Storuman,
Sweden

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June 2018

Introduction

The FREE Range scholarship program was an opportunity for myself and several other students to visit the Center for Rural Medicine in Storuman, Sweden to undertake various forms of field research. As part of my MSc, I went to Storuman to learn more about the e-health models that the Västerbotten region had implemented over the past 15 years. My goal is to better design pilot projects, specifically e-health initiatives, so that they are better suited to survive in a complex adaptive system. The FREE Range program provided an extraordinary possibility to not only further my own research, but also gain a broader understanding of lifestyles within rural communities, create lasting relationships with likeminded scholars, and come to a deeper understanding of what 'rural research' actually means to myself, and the populations the research will ultimately serve. As such, this reflection will be divided into 3 distinct parts: The research I conducted, the broader context of doing research within rural communities, and the relationships I built with other scholars and with the locals of Storuman.

The research section of this reflection will primarily contain considerations of being physically present in a well connected center of research, the importance of gaining insight into the context of what you are researching, the lack of sufficient distractions, and the feeling of accountability you develop as you progress through your research. The broader context of rural communities section will include deliberations on the importance of the research to the rural community in general, the surprises or alterations you may have to the preconceptions of rural communities, and a discussion of context as the single most important factor to consider when undertaking research. The last section will be a reflection on the friends I have made; both in the community and with the other scholars who were present at the Center for Rural Medicine (CRM), as well as the importance of networking between scholars, technicians, physicians, and citizens to gather as much of a holistic approach as possible to your research (and to try to encompass the context already mentioned above). Finally the conclusion will hopefully wrap up the reflection by tying the three sections together, and highlighting the

importance of the FREE Range program, while providing support for its continued implementation for future students.

The Research

Before Leaving for Storuman, my MSc research was at a crossroads. Complexity science (the analysis of complex adaptive systems and the entities within them) was something that had interested me in the past, but I wasn't sure how to best work it into my MSc. Similarly, e-health initiatives and the transitioning of 'emergency departments' in Canada to 'collaborative care centers' was another thing that I wanted to investigate, as I saw it as further marginalization to an already marginalized population. Before I left, I met with my supervisor to try and work out a direction for my research, and we agreed that the FREE Range program would offer me a substantial opportunity to examine the e-health initiatives already in place, and to try and work out why some had worked while others had not, from a complexity science perspective. With this broad idea in mind, I set off for Sweden, and shortly after arriving, knew that my topic was both important to the ongoing efforts of care providers in Sweden, and the people associated with Umeå university and the CRM.

Whenever you are conducting research, sometimes the question of 'so what?' starts to creep into the back of your head. Is this something that is *really* worth looking into? Does anyone else *actually* care about the results? This sense of doubt is easily fostered when much of your research is conducted shut away in a quiet campus library, with little interaction with other stakeholders or researchers, and seemingly endless amounts of literature ahead of you (contributing to the thought that 'it has all been done before'). Removing myself from that environment and being physically present in a place such as the CRM was extremely beneficial for my research and provided me with ample motivation to continue with my studies. Even simple encouragement such as hearing your research is interesting, or having a colleague request an article you are reading, provides a sense of purpose and direction which can be difficult to muster when you are removed from other people conducting similar research.

This sense of purpose goes further than simply providing you with future direction, but also begins to instill in you a sense of accountability. It can be rather easy to convince yourself that what you are doing can be done tomorrow, or that the research you are conducting may not be of the highest quality, but its okay because you are the only one who will be reading it in the future. Once you begin to have other stakeholders start to show interest in what you are doing, the quality of your work begins to improve, and you develop more ownership of the research you are involved with. I think that this accountability I began to feel after my first week at the CRM would definitely have developed had I never taken part in the FREE Range program, but probably only when there was the pressure of a deadline, or some other such evaluative process, months later. Accountability arose organically because of the attitudes towards my research that my colleagues had, which greatly influenced the quality of my work, as well as the considerations I put into readings or meetings. This would not have been possible without the FREE Range opportunity.

Besides your physical presence helping you develop meaningful interactions with likeminded colleagues, it also helps give you a better understanding of the context your research will be introduced into, and the everyday lifestyle of your study population. It is one thing to read about rural communities and populations in scientific literature; quite another to live in a small cabin engrained within one of these communities. You begin to understand common struggles rural populations face, whether that be transportation time, a decreasing number of services, or the reluctant acceptance of the declining population (a trend which as a whole is not true; but this will be discussed in broader detail in the 'rural communities' section). At a recent conference, a patient advocate spoke about the 'Petri dish to patient' phenomenon that she experienced when she met a scientist working on an extremely rare disease her daughter had. Much of the same happened to me, except a more apt phrase may be 'pubmed to patient'. Understanding that your research, if conducted well, will have real impact on the everyday lives of a marginalized population provides further motivation to produce a high quality investigation.

Lastly, the lack of distractions within Storuman made being productive much more attainable than at home. By nature of being a small town, there are not too many places to go after 5pm. As a result, much of my time outside of regular work hours was spent with my fellow researchers from the CRM, which provided occasions for 'off the record' conversations about anything from our respective projects to life in general. The lack of distractions and tranquil nature of rural life created a productive atmosphere, that was not prone to the sometimes problematic factors of a more urban center. I found that I spent time more wisely than I would have at home (Ottawa, Canada) because I knew that my time in Storuman was limited, and that people were counting on me for results (as discussed above). Distractions turned into fruitful conversations helping focus my research and come to a finer understanding of what the research means to myself and others.

The broader rural community

Touched on above was the importance for me to get out of the library and into a community to realize that my research was of more importance than I initially realized. Rural populations are populations which have already experienced a vast amount of marginalization in recent years. Loss of critical services, less political and industrial power, and mass migrations of youth have resulted in a feeling of at best uncertainty and at worst hopelessness about the future. E-health initiatives are a possible way to decrease the issue of remoteness, and to bridge the gap between access to healthcare between urban and rural communities. Much along the same themes mentioned previously, putting yourself into the actual environment your research could impact further provides meaning to what you are doing. Seeing the centers for care in rural communities and how they can be improved makes you realize how you can improve healthcare experiences on a person to person basis. I had the opportunity to see a Virtual Health Room (VHR) in a small village about 60km from Storuman. I had a chance to hear about an elderly woman who found out that she was diabetic specifically because of the implementation of this VHR. Travelling to the VHR, seeing how it is used, and hearing how it has

positively impacted the community makes e-health initiatives seem like a much brighter avenue of research than reading about p-values and confidence intervals in a comparatively cold statistical paper. Without the FREE Range program, I would continue to consider e-health projects in terms of numbers and dollars, instead of seeing the forest through the trees and understanding how they benefit patients outside of the costs associated with e-health.

Before going to Storuman, I certainly had many perceptions about rural communities that were then proven incorrect. In keeping with the general narrative of rural decay, I envisioned broken windows, vacant businesses, and tumbleweeds rolling down main street. The actual community was much different. The refugee crisis of the early 2010s resulted in a large amount of refugees coming to live in Storuman, and I saw many of these families grocery shopping, out for a walk, or simply stopping to chat with friends on a street corner. This dispelled the preconception of vacancy and decay that I had before I came, and I was surprised to find a vibrant and seemingly thriving community of young families; not the typical demographic you envision when you think of a modern rural community. In addition to this, there were two superstores, a school, a pool-hall, and a sports complex including a basketball gym and ice-rink. All this infrastructure resulted in a relatively bustling center of commerce and recreation.

I also had the opportunity to coach basketball in the community, which gave me great insight into the lives of the youth and children within Storuman. If I were to be transported into the gym from the outside, I would not be able to differentiate the basketball practice from rural Sweden to urban Toronto. Around 25 children came once a week for basketball practice, and they all seemed to greatly enjoy it. Certainly the ideas I had of the youth wasting time in any number of ways seemed to be wrong, as basketball was run one night, while there was floorball another and soccer on another night as well. Keeping them engaged with athletics seemed to be a good way of ensuring that they did not spend their time getting up to trouble.

Both of the examples previously discussed go to show the importance of understanding the context of your research environment. Before going to Storuman, I may have written an introduction or article discussing the many challenges facing modern rural settings. Having lived in one of these communities for 2 months, I can now speak on the context of rural living with more authority than simply reading about it. Understanding the broader context of the environment you are targeting your research towards is invaluable in creating more nuanced insights and better informed recommendations. Although I was generally aware of the importance of context before I left for Sweden, living there and trying to get involved with the community helped immensely in developing an appreciation for the phrase 'context is king'.

Networking and building relationships

When I arrived to Storuman, I knew nothing about my colleagues besides their names, perhaps their research interests, and what I had heard second-hand from my supervisor. It is safe to say in retrospect that everyone I met there, from students involved in the FREE Range program through to the professors at the CRM and associated personnel at Umeå, were fantastic researchers and people. I learned a lot from them, both from a research perspective and from a rural living perspective that would not have been possible if I had been in Ottawa. The relationships I made with other student researchers were especially rich and transformative, and I found it beneficial to my own research to sit down with other students and work out problems they were encountering with their projects. The relationships I formed were not one off encounters, and I look forward to working with both the professors and students involved in the program in the future.

Working with the basketball team also allowed me to take on a mentorship roll with the youth who came to the weekly basketball trainings. I found this role extremely fulfilling, especially when the kids would see me in the town and shout out a hello, or seek my advice for their jump shots. Building these relationships with both my colleagues as well as the people of the town transformed my research

from an outsiders perspective to a more holistic and all encompassing approach. I wasn't performing research on a population anymore, but working with friends, future NBA stars, and colleagues to redefine rural living and rural communities. This transition from 'researching on' to 'researching with' helped me further engrain myself in the community and helped to better connect with the people of Storuman.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the FREE Range scholarship afforded me an opportunity to travel to Sweden to undertake field research, but in actuality provided me with a wealth of both research and life experiences. From a deeper understanding of the importance of context, to disproving preconceptions of rural living, to creating lifelong friendships, the program afforded me outstanding occasions to further my research and build a lasting network of friends and colleagues. I recommend that any student who in the future has the chance to take advantage of the program jump at it, as you will be a better researcher because of it.