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Everyday social work practice: Listening to the voices of practitioners

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In memory of my good friend, Dr Ken McCulloch, his learning, and
love of interesting conversations.

Everyday social work practice: Listening to the voices of practitioners

I confirm that:

1. I have written this critical review.
2. I have made a substantial contribution to the research and published writing that forms this submission.
3. Where the research and published writing have been collaborative, I have clearly identified my role, and that of practitioners and other researchers.
4. This work has not been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification.

Jean Gordon

11.6.18

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Index of contents

	<i>Page Nos.</i>
Abstract	11
Lay Summary	13
Introduction	15
Critical review: Purpose and structure	19
Aims and research questions	21
The research in context	23
Constructing social work	19
Research methodology, methods and analysis	37
Thinking ethically	47
Research findings	55
Discussion	65
Contribution to research, learning and professional development	79
Looking back and looking forwards	85
References	89
Appendix 1: Summary of published work	97
Appendices 2 – 6: Publications	105

Abstract

Despite an extensive literature, there is surprisingly little research about what social workers do in their day to day practice. This body of published work, supported by critical review, argues that we need to hear, and learn from, practitioner voices if we are to comprehend the breadth, challenges and potential of social work practice. It contributes to a steadily expanding field of research that is exploring the hidden, frequently misunderstood, and often negatively perceived, world of everyday practice. By making social work more visible, we open up opportunities for students, social workers, other professionals and the public to learn about the profession's work by engaging with the live challenges and dilemmas encountered by practitioners.

My research examines the actual work of social work by analysing practitioner narratives to reveal the ways in which social workers recount, reflect on and learn from direct work with service users and their families. Most of the research is informed by a strengths-based, narrative perspective, the critical best practice approach. It draws on qualitative methods, consistent with a social constructionist stance that recognises the contingency of practice with its multiple subjectivities, uncertainties, contested viewpoints and constant flux. Three main themes are explored: social workers' use of knowledge, their decision-making and judgement when services users are at risk of harm, or pose a risk to others, and the integration of practice and theory in a student practice placement. I also report on two related inquiries, one focusing on the experience of co-publication with practitioners, and the other on social workers' use of self in practice.

The notion of 'best' practice is found, inevitably, to be fraught with ambiguity, raising important questions about the criteria on which judgements about 'good' practice

can be made, and who is entitled to make them. My review tackles these and other theoretical, methodological and ethical issues that I encountered during the research. An essential thread that runs through all the research findings is the need for a critical, reflexive approach to everyday practice that recognises the situated, and often contradictory, nature of voice and of the practices described.

Taken together, the research findings stress the centrality of practitioner capabilities such as relationship building, critical reflection, skilful use of self, respectful authority, curiosity, creativity and the ability to combine a range of different forms of knowledge in imaginative and flexible ways. They collectively make a strong case for valuing and learning from direct access to practitioners' experiences of practice. The research, conducted in a range of UK contexts, identifies how and why social workers' voices continue to fail to be heard, and suggests a number of ways of tackling gaps in our understanding. From a personal point of view, the research is also my own story of learning about doing research into my profession over the last ten years, and of seeking to share and use the findings to improve social work practice and make a difference to people who use social work services, their friends, families and communities.

Lay Summary

We know surprisingly little about what social workers actually do in their day to day work, and the public often has a negative perception of social workers. The aim of this research is to make social work practice more visible, so that practitioners can learn to do the job better, and the public and professionals can gain a more realistic understanding of what social workers do, and how they do it. During the research, I interviewed social workers and asked them to talk about how they had worked with a particular individual or family. The social workers were based in Scotland and England, and worked in different settings, including children and family teams, community care services and criminal justice social work offices. Some of the social workers helped to analyse the interviews they participated in, and wrote book chapters or research papers with myself and other co-authors.

The topics discussed during the interviews were: how social workers use a range of different kinds of knowledge to inform their work, how they respond to people who are at risk of harm – or who might pose a danger to others – and how social work students draw together theory and practice. Throughout this research I needed to take a critical, questioning look at the idea of ‘good’ social work. This is because how social workers practice depends so much on the practice context, including each service user’s wishes and circumstances, what kind of support or assistance may be required and the availability of resources to meet people’s needs.

The research findings emphasise the importance of social workers being able to build trusting relationships, reflect on and learn from practice, use authority respectfully, be questioning, show leadership and draw on a wide range of knowledge in imaginative and flexible ways. The research makes a strong case for valuing and learning from practitioners’ stories of practice. It shows how and why social workers’ voices sometimes go unheard, and suggests different ways in which accounts of everyday practice could be sought out, listened to and learnt from. From a personal point of view, this thesis is also my own story of learning about doing research into my profession and the lessons I have learned over the last ten years.

Introduction

'So, what do you do?'

'I'm a social worker'

'That must be a very stressful job...'

'Yes, it is. but...'

'...though, to be honest, I've never quite understood what social workers do...'

I have taken part in variations of this conversation since I qualified as a social worker in 1981. Whether the questioner is genuinely interested, hostile, curious or just indifferent, my responses have rarely done justice to my experience of being a social worker, to the profession - or to the people who use social work services. Somehow the conversations tend to peter out, as I struggle for a quick answer to what feels like a big question, compounded by the questioner's tendency to equate social work with child abuse and removing children from their families.

That the general public struggle to understand a social worker's job is perhaps unsurprising, given the wide range of roles that social workers take on. Social work practice also largely takes place behind closed doors, engaging with the most marginalised and disadvantaged members of society, out of public sight and mind, until a child or adult abuse tragedy brings it sharply into media focus. The reasons for this lack of understanding may go deeper than this, to a certain reluctance to contemplate the work of profession that engages daily with some of the most disadvantaged, socially excluded and stigmatised members of society (Cree, 2013).

I first became aware of social work as 'an inherently invisible trade' (Pithouse, 1987) when, early in my qualified career, I made the move from a residential school to hospital social work. Used to working in a tight-knit team, where practitioners' actions were highly visible, and supportive, developmental feedback constantly shared, I became a predominantly lone worker, visiting people at home or meeting patients in hospital interview

rooms. I had many opportunities to learn and develop new knowledge as I gained my Mental Health Officer award, and took on new responsibilities in a multidisciplinary community mental health team. However, although I regularly worked alongside doctors, occupational therapists and nurses, I rarely saw other social workers at work, or had the opportunity to take part in discussions about what we did after we headed out of the office door 'on a visit'. There was talk of course, at team meetings and over coffees, but this was usually about 'cases', about opening and closing them, who was going to do what, and when, and how to respond to crisis situations, rather than any in depth sharing of how we engaged and worked with service users and their families. As Pithouse found in his ethnographic study of a social work office, often it was only in supervision, in 'telling the case' to my line manager (Ibid, p.108), that I was called upon to open up my work to scrutiny and, sometimes, to reflection.

In 1997, I started supporting student learning as a practice educator, observing and assessing students in practice during their field placements. This brought home to me just how rare this opportunity to observe and respond to another's 'live' social work practice is. The observations tended to be anxiety-provoking experiences for students: Was this really the 'right' way to 'do social work'? What would a 'real' social worker do in the same circumstances? I recall many of the same anxieties on placement in a child and family psychiatry clinic in the early 1980s when most of my interactions with families were viewed through a one way viewing screen. One of the most stressful experiences of my career, it was also enormously stimulating, and I still draw on what I learnt from watching other social workers at work, as well as the feedback I received about my own practice with children and families.

When I made the shift from direct social work practice to research and training 15 years ago, I struggled to locate a literature that talked to the lived, everyday experience of social workers. This interested and puzzled me. I wondered why, when the profession has a burgeoning literature about the

values and theoretical basis for practice, it was so difficult to find accounts of practice from the worker's perspective. When, in 2009, I was offered the opportunity to join a small team at The Open University to explore the use of a critical best practice approach to research day to day social work practice, I jumped at the chance. Critical best practice aims to promote learning by making visible examples of what social work practice looks like when it is done well (Ferguson, 2003). The approach draws on several interweaving theoretical strands, including narrative, strengths based and critical perspectives. Its aim of challenging negative perceptions of the profession struck a chord with me, resonating with my experience of using strengths approaches in practice, and appreciative inquiry in research. Most importantly, it provided a possible way into capturing, conveying, understanding and learning from examples of what social work, in the words of David Howe, 'feels like, looks like and smells like on the ground' (Cooper et al., 2015, p.vii). Whether the fruit of this ten year journey makes it any easier to answer the 'And what do social workers do?' question is another matter, and one that I will return to later in this review. Taking as one's focus 'practices' which are both 'critical' and 'best' necessarily raises a host of questions about what we mean by a social work 'practice', whether and when it is ever legitimate to describe this as 'best', and how to honour the 'critical' intention of the approach. My attempts to answer these questions will form an undercurrent throughout this review. I explain below how I have approached and structured my research critique.

Critical Review: Purpose and structure

My reasons for wanting to bring together and consolidate my research are threefold. The first is that I see the process of critical review as a way of deepening understanding of the value of the practitioner's voice and finding effective ways to hear it better. Within this, I have a particular desire to see narratives of practice play a more significant role in social work education and engagement with the public about professional practice. Secondly, my critical reflection on the research will identify some of the fault lines, and gaps in our knowledge of everyday social work that require to be addressed in the future. And finally, from a personal perspective, I anticipate that this opportunity to scrutinise my research practice will contribute to my development as a researcher, educator and social worker. This is not only an inquiry about other social workers' practices; listening and responding to practitioners' narratives is necessarily also a story of self-inquiry, reflexivity and the possibility of personal growth. Taking a reflexive stance demands honesty about an additional motivation, that of achieving public recognition for the research I have done, mostly outwith the academy, and therefore somewhat hidden from view. In a less self-centred way, I hope that, by opening up my research to debate and critique, I can contribute to an outward-looking narrative research tradition, a means of 'looking out at the world as an invitation to dialogue and social action' (Johns, 2010, p.257).

Critically reviewing my research has given me the opportunity to read more widely about the benefits and challenges that attend researching practice through narrative. I have had the chance to explore, discuss and think more deeply about my theoretical stance, about what I know, and what I have to come, sometimes without sufficient thought, to count as knowledge. Others' stories of practice, including narratives from social workers, students, occupational therapists, nurses, doctors and researchers have resonated with me and broadened my understanding of the power of narrative (Coles, 1989; Ruch, 2000; Cree, 2003, 2013; Cree and Davis, 2007; Ellis, 2003; Finlay, 2002; Graham, 2017; Johns 2010; Jones et al., 2008; Jones and

Watson, 2013; Witkin, 2014). Finally, a commitment to reflexivity requires 'audible authorship' (Chamaz and Mitchell, 1997) and 'a way of finding my own voice' (Graham, 2017, p. 12). As I've worked on this review, and benefited from feedback from my advisor, Vivienne Cree, this reflexive element has become more substantial. This more personal story about me and my development as a researcher, runs alongside, and is interwoven with, the account of the research itself.

This review is designed to be read in tandem with the publications in Appendices 1 - 6 of this thesis. I recognise that its multiple sources may make the reading experience somewhat disjointed. In an effort to smooth the reader's passage, and avoid repetition, Appendix 1 numbers and summarises the key publications that I refer to ([JG1 – 8]). I will also indicate key points where there are important 'joins' between the review and the publications, for example, when reference to a particular publication is needed for a fuller explanation of a topic's historical or theoretical background.

I will start by setting out the aims, context, theoretical underpinnings, methodology, ethical stance, and findings of the published work. I then go on to explore a number of central dilemmas and puzzles that I encountered as I researched practitioner narratives, before assessing the contribution of the published work to social work practice, policy and learning. Throughout the review I will be asking questions about the assumptions on which my¹ research and writing are based and seeking to critique the approaches taken and conclusions drawn.

¹ I use the first person in this account to indicate research that I have had a primary role in designing, conducting, analysing and reporting on. Where that role is shared I will refer to 'we' or 'us' and make it clear that this is a collaborative element of this submission.

Aims and research questions

There are many perspectives from which to understand social work practice. Crucially, we have a responsibility to listen to and learn from what service users and carers have to tell us about their experience of social workers and their interventions, as Mayer and Timms did in their ground-breaking research, 'The Client Speaks' (1970). We can also access the perceptions of policy makers, researchers, educationalists and members of the public of the profession and its contribution to society. The focus of this review is, however, on the social worker's voice, one seldom heard in the literature ([JG1, 3, 8]). 'Voice' can be understood in the narrow sense of speech and talk, or, more broadly and inclusively, as 'a shorthand that implies presence and positioning whether that is achieved through talking, writing, research or the many embodied ways in which voice is expressed through people's lived experience' ([JG8, p.5]). It is on this, wider, definition that I draw on in my narrative literature review, [JG8], and desk research about the positioning of use of self in social work practice ([JG6]). A more literal interpretation of voice, as the talk of social workers, is made in the four qualitative sources, which draw on face to face interviews with social work practitioners ([JG1, 2, 5, 7]).

This review takes a retrospective view of a body of research which has grown gradually, and mostly organically, with my increasing interest in researching everyday social work. Two central questions lie at the heart of all the research:

- How do social workers conceptualise their day to day practice?
- (How) can learning from social workers' accounts of everyday practice be used to improve social work practice?

Incorporated into each study are other, intertwining, questions. For example [JG1]'s focus is on how social workers use knowledge, [JG2]'s about responses to risk and [JG6] about use of self in practice. Everyday practice is studied in a range of different contexts, including children and family teams,

adult care and criminal justice practice. The research participants comprise main grade and senior social workers, managers, a foster carer and a student social worker. Three participants worked in England, and the rest were based in Scotland ([JG2], pp.89-124). Despite these contrasts in purpose, social work specialism and location, a unifying thread runs through all the research of trying to gain a better understanding of social work and its practice through the lens of the practitioner. The ultimate goal is, however, more ambitious than this – that this improved understanding will translate into more skilled and effective practice with service users and carers. My research cannot claim to demonstrate a direct connection between learning, practice and outcomes, but will explore the potential for using a better understanding of ‘the how’ of social work practice to improve education and practice in ways that have potential to benefit the people who use social work services.

The research in context

‘Strangely, there is little research into the way experienced practitioners actually work with the users of their services.’

(Parsloe, 2001, p.11)

Phyllida Parsloe’s observation, made 17 years ago as part of a retrospective reflection on the state of social work education, neatly sums up the starting point for this review. The assertion that there is insufficient knowledge about how social workers practice has been made with increasing regularity since then. This question is also generating a growing interest in developing research methodologies that allow us to get closer to practice. [JG8]’s narrative literature review states that, ‘although the social worker’s voice is beginning to be heard more clearly, research into the ‘doing’ of social work is only just getting off the starting block’ (p. 1). The evidence for this conclusion is set out in detail in the journal article, so my aim here is to summarise the key arguments for conducting the research, and to bring the literature review, completed in December 2016, up to date.

The strange absence of social work voices

[JG8] draws on evidence that social work literature has, for at least the last 40 years, focused on the theory of social work, and direction about what social workers should and should not do, rather than how they actually do it (Jones et al., 2008). A paucity of research into day to day social work practice has been identified in many contexts, including hospitals, child and family practice, work with asylum seekers and practice education. Moreover, it is difficult, with some notable exceptions, to find first hand or biographical accounts of social workers’ lives or their day to day working experiences (Stevenson, 2013). [JG8] summarises the possible reasons for this ‘remarkable absence’ (Ferguson, 2013, p.121), which include:

- The stigma and unpopularity associated with the social worker’s role – as advocate for the most excluded members of society and,

simultaneously, gatekeeper of scarce resources, especially during times of austerity (Cree, 2013).

- Marginalisation of a profession that is predominantly female, and so more likely to be sidelined and lack influence than more 'male professions' (Weick, 2000).
- A generally hostile media (and sometimes political establishment) that paints a negative view of the profession (Shoesmith, 2016).
- Ambiguity and conflicts within and outwith the profession about what it is that social workers actually do (Butler et al., 2007).
- The invisibility of social work, both because of its commitment to confidentiality and due to its relatively hidden sites of activity, typically people's homes and other private spaces (Pithouse, 1987).

Some of these causes are also barriers to conducting research close to where practice happens, including the highly charged nature of many social work interactions. Studying risk of harm ([JG2]), for example, practitioners, understandably, often wanted to discuss their most challenging work with families, but the specificity and sensitivity of these accounts also made these the most difficult to report on without compromising service users' privacy.

There has been recognition in all four UK nations that there is limited public understanding of the social work role, and a need to take action to improve the profession's confidence and standing. A series of policy reviews, including the Munro Review (Munro, 2011) and Scotland's 21st Century Review of Social Work (Scottish Executive, 2006), has emphasised the benefits of sharing the profession's successes and positive stories. In Scotland, 'The View from Here' project (2015-7) aims to improve public understanding by sharing tales of frontline care work, through poetry, songs, stories and letters (IRISS, 2018). [JG1] and [JG3] explore this context in greater detail than is possible here. Whilst significant, and potentially influential in changing public perceptions, these initiatives have to be set against a persistently negative portrayal of the social work profession in mainstream media (Ayre, 2001, Legood et al., 2016).

Learning more from social work voices

An increasing concern to improve our understanding of what social workers do and of their experience of doing it, reported on in [JG8], is continuing to open up new areas for research. This has been particularly the case in child and family social work where Ferguson's ethnographic research (2017) into social work home visiting has revealed how children can become invisible in child protection. The Talking and Listening to Children (TLC) project, a UK-wide study, used ethnographic and other methods to improve understanding of day to day communication between social workers and children (Ruch et al., 2017; Winter et al., 2017). Other under-researched topics have recently come under the microscope, such as social workers' use of interpreters (Westlake and Jones, 2017). Practice-near² approaches have also been challenging our taken-for-granted understandings of such social work shibboleths as reflective practice (Ferguson, 2018) and supervision (Wilkins et al., 2017). Both studies demonstrate just how little we know about apparently fundamental pillars of modern day social work and how much we can learn by studying how they are enacted in practice. Despite the lack of empirical research, these are not entirely new reflections. Back in 1981, Phyllida Parsloe, studying the rise of social services area teams, was struck by 'how little that is "obvious"' about widely accepted ways of working. Taking a long and inclusive view of the literature about how social workers practice is essential, if we are to benefit from past insights and build on our knowledge of everyday practice.

Why listen to social work voices?

Just as assumptions cannot be made about reflective practice, supervision or teamwork, we cannot make uncritical assumptions about the value of listening to the social worker's voice, however enacted. Taken together, literature about the voice of the social worker makes a number of claims

^{2 2} 'Practice-near' is used here in the sense of the use of 'experience-near' methods such as ethnography, some types of in depth qualitative interviewing, and the use of sound, images and other sensory data to get close to practice (Froggett and Briggs, 2012).

about why it is important to listen to what social workers can tell us. These claims, set out in more detail in [JG8], are that:

- Giving voice, and listening to others' voices, is validating for the individual social worker and the social work profession, countering a pervasive 'deficit' culture within the social work profession, and offering opportunities for self-discovery and shared learning.
- Students and qualified social workers can learn from in-depth accounts of others' practice, forms of research and writing that they have previously had little access to.
- Recognising practice as an inductive form of inquiry and a means of knowledge creation opens up the possibility of new kinds of theory for practice.
- Detailed examination of practice enables the building of a more realistic evidence base about what actually happens when policy is translated into practice, and, conversely, to develop policies that work in practice. This could also improve our ability to make more effective use of helping resources.
- Direct access to social workers' day to day practice offers opportunities to identify changing needs and new research questions.
- A stronger voice for social work will contribute to public education about the profession, could impact positively on recruitment and enable social workers to bring issues that impact on service users, such as benefit cuts and fuel poverty, to public attention.

It would certainly be bold, as well as inaccurate, to make all these claims for the research I have conducted. However, the potential for improved social work practice that these six claims encapsulate is what has motivated me to pursue my interest in the voice of the social worker. At the end of the review I will assess the extent to which the work I have undertaken contributes to the growing body of knowledge about how social work happens in practice.

Constructing social work

So far in this critical review, I have been using terms like 'voice', 'practice' and 'best' as if their meanings were incontestably straightforward. Now I turn to the theory of social constructionism as a means of interrogating, and sometimes taking apart, these and other key concepts. This discussion will provide the groundwork for outlining my methodological approaches and ethical commitments.

Constructing voice

One of the starting points of this research is that insufficient attention is paid to the 'voice' of the social worker. Here 'voice' is defined as an expression of the social worker's 'presence and positioning whether that is achieved through talking, writing, research or the many embodied ways in which voice is expressed through people's lived experience' [JG8, p.4]. However is voice 'a shape-shifter of a concept' [Ibid.] with differing meanings that need to be teased out before we can study its relevance to social work.

My emphasis is on the social worker's voice, singled out for the very reason that it tends to be marginalised, drowned out by other, more powerful, apparently expert, voices. In contrast, during interactions with service users, it is the social worker who is gifted with the greater power, in turn potentially marginalising and silencing the service user's voice. So voice is intimately tied up with power and with the way in which dominant discourses, about, for example, the positioning of 'risk' or 'knowledge' in social work practice, serve to marginalise the knowledge of others. Foucault (1980, p.82) has described a historical and continuing struggle whereby 'global unitary knowledges' drown out and subjugate locally produced knowledge, distrusted and disregarded as being 'beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity'. What voices have to say, and their strength and dominance can be therefore seen as situated, a product of time, place and context, and the relations between individuals, social groups and organisations. We cannot posit a single social work voice any more than we can say that 'all service users

feel...' or 'academics tell us..'. However, we can, it is argued, learn much from attending to these many voices, though necessarily with a critical and inquiring mindset, wary of the power of voice to persuade, dominate, distract and, sometimes, harm [JG8].

This understanding of voice as dynamic, relational, situated and contested emerges from a social constructionist understanding of the world and our relationships in it. The underlying premise of social construction is that,

'..the world we live in and our place in it are not simply and evidently 'there' for participants. Rather, participants actively construct the world of everyday life and its constituent elements.'

(Gubrium and Holstein, 2008, p.3)

A social constructionist view of practice provides a challenge to prescriptive 'truths', instead stressing the unique interplay between individuals and the social context in every interaction. Rather than perceiving the existence of multiple voices as a problem to be solved, all are regarded as potential contributors to achieving greater understanding. It is beyond the scope of this review to unpack the many different versions of social constructionism, but Witkin's delineation of four key resemblances common to this 'family' of theories provides an organising framework for the discussion that follows:

- Knowledge is historically, culturally and socially contingent, rather than based on any ultimate 'truths'.
- Knowledge is both a form of power and of social action, constructed and sustained by social processes,
- Language plays a central role in our social relations and is key to the generation and maintenance of meaning.
- A critical stance is required to enable us to take an open, inquiring and sceptical view of taken-for-granted knowledge

Witkin (2017, p.22)

I move now to explain how this epistemology plays out in relation to the research I have done. My research into knowledge and into risk of harm

using the critical best practice approach has been explicitly informed by social constructionism, so this task, at first, seemed to me to be a fairly straightforward proposition. Until, that is, I came up against the realisation that I had failed to apply a critical lens to the idea of 'practice'. So, before I can say more about the construction of 'critical' and 'best' practice, I need to engage in some deconstruction of what turns out to have been a taken-for-granted concept at the heart of my research.

De-constructing everyday practice

Practice, practising, practitioner, practice placement, practice educator. These are words that run through all my writing like letters through a stick of Brighton rock. I find it interesting, and a bit disturbing, that, until I embarked on this doctorate path, I never thought to interrogate what we mean when we talk about 'practice'. Instead, I have tended to use the word in a fairly unthinking way, often paired with, or placed in contrast to, 'theory'. When I tell research participants that I am researching 'everyday practice', I notice that I tend to get positive responses: 'Well, I'm glad someone is' and 'It's about time!'. I am seeing now that I have tended to fall in with a rather comfortable consensus, that there exists a shared understanding of what 'everyday practice' is, and that studying it is, incontrovertibly, 'a good thing'.

There are many detailed accounts of how social workers act when things have gone wrong, when a child or adult has died or experienced abuse and neglect. We know far less about what it is that most social workers do all the time, from visiting families at home and attending meetings, to writing reports and making phone calls. During my career I have done all these things, and it is tempting, therefore, when I am in conversation with practitioners, to assume that we share the same understanding of what 'practice' is. Finlay (2002, p.537), writing of her experiences as researcher and occupational therapist, stresses the need to 'unravel instances in which my participants and I shared understandings and ones in which we diverged'. I have had to do some of my own unravelling in order to understand what I take for granted

about the idea of social work practice. To do so, I have drawn on two particular perspectives on practice, those of Michel De Certeau and Richard Sennett.

De Certeau (1984, p.xi), a French philosopher, made it his mission to rescue from obscurity a whole range of routine practices, 'ways of operating, or doing things' from cooking and reading to travelling on trains and walking down the street. His interest is in how individuals employ forms of creative resistance, or 'tactics', seizing opportunities to challenge the strategies of powerful organisational interests. These everyday practices are hidden from view, neglected by scientific epistemology, but nevertheless represent a 'victory of the weak over the strong' (Ibid, p.xix). De Certeau's social worker has agency to act, to bend the rules, make discoveries and manoeuvre, using their intuitive and mostly unrecognised 'know how' to subvert the rules and expectations of employers and policy-makers. This 'know how' has, he suggests, 'a status analogous to that granted fables and myths as the expression of kinds of knowledge that do not know themselves' (Ibid, p.71). In contrast, technocratic expansion has meant increasing emphasis on 'how to' do things, on restricting the individual practitioner's self-determination. This description of a growing tension between managerial accountability and the individual social worker's autonomy and personal engagement with practice would probably be familiar to most social workers. I can see parallels in the 'tactics' of De Certeau's practitioners with the everyday creativity, complex negotiations and small rebellions in the accounts of the social workers that I listened to during my research.

In contrast, Richard Sennett, a philosopher from the school of American pragmatism, is more interested in the way that skilful work is achieved *through* practice. Expertise comes from experience, from honing skills, a continual and repetitive process of identifying and solving problems so that 'practice beds in, making the skill one's own' (Sennett, 2008, p.295). He emphasises the importance of imagination, improvisation, intuitive leaps and pride in the work done which enables the worker to take gradual ownership of

the skill. 'The 1000 little everyday moves that add up in sum to a practice' become absorbed into tacit knowledge, into practice habits, which, like De Certeau's concept of 'know-how', as opposed to 'how to do', are often uncodified and unspoken (Ibid, p.77). Extrapolating from his ideas about practices as varied as joinery and parenting, Sennett sees the experienced social worker's practice as a 'craft', shaped by years of self-critique and reflection. There are parallels here with Schön's ideas about reflection in action: how practitioners, experiencing uncertain or unfamiliar situations, draw on past experience to help generate new understandings to inform action (1983, p.68). Reflection allows the practitioner to 'surface and criticise the tacit understandings that have grown up around the repetitive experiences of a specialised practice' (Ibid, p.61). Schön emphasises the uniqueness of practice situations, and the need for practitioners to think on their feet rather than follow rule books and training manuals. Similarly, Sennett sees the worker's craft at risk of frustration by over-standardisation and institutional prescriptions that stifle creativity, motivation and the desire to do one's job well. Both therefore challenge the dominance of technical-rational conceptions of practice as a straightforward process of rule-following to meet prescribed ends.

Both De Certeau and Sennett, in different ways, have encouraged me to think in a more questioning way about the idea of practice. Shaw (2018, p.171) recommends the cultivation of 'a Socratic scepticism especially about positions that you hold dear'. Taking a step back, and interrogating the somewhat cosy, sometimes romanticised, idea of 'everyday practice' opens up this review to more searching scrutiny of questions of power, social processes and expertise in my research. I will be picking up and running with these ideas as I come to discuss my findings. I return now to the apparently more precisely defined idea of 'critical best practice', the approach that plays a role in all but one of my sources ([JG 6]). I set out this theoretical stance below, starting to flag up the potential benefits and challenges of taking this approach to constructing social work practice.

Critical best practice

Critical best practice, an approach developed by Harry Ferguson (2003), brings together two traditions of writing about social work, critical social theory and a more pragmatic literature about practice methods. It draws on detailed analyses of practice in specific contexts, recognising the unique nature of each interaction and the creativity, agency and learning that can emerge from skilled work (see [JG1] and [JG3] for a more detailed account). Importantly, this practice is situated within the particular organisational and social context in which it takes place, with all the complexity and unequal power relations that go along with the practice of social work. 'Best' practice might be taken to mean some kind of objective gold standard, but the interest is instead on 'what is possible at that particular time in that particular situation with that combination of people, processes and circumstances' (JG3], p.5). Critical best practice recognises that there are no simple 'good' or 'bad' outcomes, especially when social workers are working within the kinds of complex, conflictual and risk-laden circumstances described in, for example, [JG2]. Critical best practice aims to provide a demonstration of the ways in which practitioners use their powers to intervene in people's lives in ways which are ethical and respectful to service users and carers (Ferguson, 2008). This practice is perceived as 'best' precisely because it is 'critical', taking an inquiring and sceptical perspective that recognises that 'things are rarely are just as they seem on the surface' ([JG2], p.6). Critical approaches have the potential to challenge and change power relations so that the voices of marginalised interests can be heard and included (Fook, 2016). This stance is closely aligned with social constructionism, and is one of the aims of the critical best practice approach.

Critical best practice provides a close fit with Parton and O'Byrne's articulation of an 'explicitly positive' theory of constructive social work 'from detailed analysis of what goes on between social worker and service user' (2000, p.3), a perspective, they suggest, that poses a challenge to increasing managerialism in the workplace. They stress the role of narrative and

language, central to this research which takes as its primary focus social workers' stories of practice. The social workers' narratives are reflections on practice that has already happened, combining recall of events, exploration of why they acted as they did, and reflection on what might have been done differently. Narrative approaches recognise 'the meaningfulness of individual experiences' by bringing different, and sometimes apparently unconnected, elements of existence into a more or less coherent whole (Polkinghorne, 1988, p.173). Social work can itself be regarded as a narrative endeavour, involving sense-making through different forms of interaction, written and non-verbal as well as spoken. So much so that Roscoe and Madoc-Jones have suggested that, in social work, 'we speak ourselves into existence within the stories available to us' (2009, p.10).

A social constructionist perspective tells us that the social worker's narrative is just a single version of reality, rooted in a particular time and place, and coloured by the individual's perspective and social context. Others' stories, and the interpretations we place on them, influence our own constructions of ourselves, and our relationship with the social world. Social workers are professional listeners to others' stories, which in turn contribute to practitioners' understanding of that world, and are reconstructed through re-tellings in meetings, supervision, case notes and reports. Stories also provide a way of communicating who we are, and so are intimately tied up with practitioners' identity as social workers, and how they use their different selves in practice. The idea that social workers make purposeful 'use' of themselves in practice is not a new one, but the concept of 'use of self' remains contested and surprisingly under-researched. In [JG6] I ask questions about how we assess aspiring social workers' competence in relating to and understanding their own emotional responses to others. Here social constructionism comes bumping up against professional regulation and the 'objective' measurement of personal qualities, attitudes and relational capabilities, providing an opportunity to explore some of the tensions inherent in assessing social workers' practice.

Practitioners' narratives potentially provide a window into Schön's 'reflection on action', 'the process of thinking back on what we have done to discover how our knowing-in-action may have contributed to an unexpected outcome' (Schön, 1983, p.26). Though if, as Schön, as well as Sennett, propose, this 'know-how' is tacit, embedded in intuitive thinking and action in ways that can make it difficult for the practitioner to bring their knowledge to the surface, then asking a practitioner to 'talk about practice' will not be quite as straightforward as it initially sounds, as indeed I have found. There are other challenges to narrative research, including how to convey the meaning and essence of what practitioners have to say, and how best to understand the relational, dialogical nature of interactions between researcher and practitioner with their inherent power discrepancies. I will be returning to these and other challenges that emerged from the co-construction of practitioner narratives later in this review (See [JG2] (pp.16-27) and [JG5] for further discussion).

Constructing knowledge

As social work has developed as a profession, with ever-increasing demands for effectiveness, especially in times of austerity, so have debates about the legitimacy of different forms of knowledge and what can be counted as 'evidence' (Gordon, 2008). At one end of a continuum there is a 'narrow-stream' version of evidence-based practice whereby knowledge is generated from research and then applied deductively in practice. At the other, a 'broad-stream' version sees knowledge emerging inductively *from* practice (Shaw, 1999, pp.15-16). It is this inductive interpretation of knowledge building that mainly informs the research presented here.

An understanding of the social construction of knowledge necessarily informed my critical best practice inquiry how practitioners conceive of knowledge and how they use it in practice. In [JG1] I draw on the literature to question the utility of models of knowledge utilisation that assume that social workers passively make use of the knowledge generated in universities and

by policy makers. Instead, it is becoming increasingly clear that 'fluent' use of knowledge requires the practitioner to amalgamate a rich mix of experiential and theoretical knowledge sources (Secker, 1993, in Macaulay, 2000, p.11). As they do so, practitioners are constantly learning 'on the job', reconstructing past understandings and developing creative ways to make sense of the contingent and 'inherently uncertain and flexible interpersonal activity' that forms the basis of social workers' everyday practice (Payne, 2007, p.85). This conception of knowledge development, which breaks down the traditional dividing line between knowledge and skills, resonates with Sennett's description of everyday practice as a craft that builds with experience and with opportunities to encounter and tackle new situations. This understanding of the construction of knowledge in practice suggests that the most fruitful research into use of knowledge will start with social workers' accounts of their practice, which are told in a language that may be very different from that of policy makers and academic researchers ([JG1], Marsh and Fisher, 2008). In keeping with a social constructionist stance, an open approach to 'evidence' and 'knowledge' is taken from the start of this research ([JG1], p. 247), leaving it to the practitioners to share their own definitions of knowledge through their detailed accounts of practice.

Constructing risk

Alongside an increasing push for evidence-based practice has come a growing societal pre-occupation with risk and protection which, it is argued has come to 'dominate the practice of social work' ([JG2], p.77) 'Risk' is another contested concept, which, in social work, has come to be seen in negative terms, as 'risk of harm', though there are small but subtle changes in language afoot, as we begin to allow that there needs to be a place in social work for supporting people to take, as well as avoid, risks. Our beliefs about risk are complex and contradictory: perceptions of dangerousness are deeply entwined with our past experiences, societal attitudes, social positioning, gender and other facets of our identity (Cree and Wallace, 2009). [JG2] (pp. 77-86) charts how understandings of risk have

changed over time, and the differing ways in which parents, children and professionals may identify and respond to risk and fear of risk. Talking to experienced social workers about how they have approached risk in a single example of practice offers an opportunity to understand and interrogate their subjective understandings of risk and responses to it. The interest here is not only in the knowledge and values of the individual practitioner, but in the context for their practice: the organisational affordances and constraints, and relationships with other professionals and with workplace cultures.

I have begun to lay out the constructionist perspective that underpins the critical best practice approach, and my research into the interweaving subjects of use of self, knowledge and risk in social work practice. This stance has necessarily informed my methodology, described below, along with some of the challenges I encountered, and strategies I used to develop methods and undertake data analysis.

Research methodology, methods and analysis

Methodology

Any attempt to describe the social world requires clarity about the philosophical assumptions on which the inquiry is based. The starting point for this research was the observation that there is very little research into day to day social work practice. The direction of travel I have chosen is one that takes its interest in the practitioner's voice, and does so because that voice is perceived to have been drowned out by other, more powerful, managerial, academic and political voices. In doing so, I am making the assumption that knowledge about what social work practice is, and what social workers do, is capable of being constructed in many different ways. This construction of knowledge is contingent on history, culture, identity, human perceptions and social experience, and is inseparable from power relations. My concern is not with the 'reality' of what practitioners have to say – whether their narratives are 'true' or 'objective' – but in how they construct their stories and what these constructed stories have to say. The 'truths' of narrative accounts, Riessman suggests, lie 'not in their faithful representations of a past world, but in the shifting connections they forge among past, present and future' (2005, p. 6). In this way, Riessman argues, we learn about the intimate connections between the personal and political, the individual and the social world in which they practice. A sceptical approach to 'truth', is particularly important when studying marginalised voices since it allows us to ask questions about 'whose truth is being asserted and how does it function in this community?' (Witkin, 2017, p.25).

Ontologically, my position can best be described as relativist, in that it rejects a realist view of a social world that exists independently from our beliefs and perceptions of it. Instead, it takes the view that different people will have different assumptions about the world, and that the meanings they ascribe to what they perceive will depend on a multitude of interacting factors, including their past experiences, race, gender, social class and sexuality. Rather than

regarding these differences as problems to be wrestled with, the diversity of voices is seen as a means of adding richness and depth to the research. It is important to note, however, that relativism is a broad church, with some tricky questions at its extremities about the morality of a philosophy that can be seen to equally privilege all voices, whatever views they may express. I will come back to this question in the 'Discussion' and 'Looking back and looking forward', along with some *post-hoc* reflection about how my approach to ontology and epistemology appears to have subtly shifted over the course of the last ten years.

These philosophical assumptions, which can only be briefly summarised here, have a number of important consequences for my research methodology:

- Research participants are seen as active contributors, rather than subjects to be studied, with a significant role in all stages of the research process, from first involvement to analysis and dissemination of the research.
- As researcher, I have a responsibility to be reflexive and analytical about the ways in which my positioning and assumptions are imposed at all stages of the research process (Hertz, 1997).
- Research design and activity are informed by an understanding that individual voices are inextricably intertwined with the historical, cultural and social context in which they are heard, analysed and conveyed to others.
- Language is important, so close attention needs to be paid to how ideas are expressed and views conveyed during the research.
- Research ethics are informed by a critical approach that recognises the potential for discrimination and oppression, and actively seeks to challenge misuse and abuse of power by honouring ethical commitments to participants and the people they tell stories about.
- The research is seen as a means to social action, aiming to achieve a better understanding of everyday social work practice, with the

intention of improving practice and, potentially, the lives of service users and their families.

These considerations, and discussion of the puzzles, challenges and unanticipated events that I have, with research colleagues and practitioners, encountered along the way will be threaded through the rest of this review. More detailed accounts of the methodology, methods and process of analysis used can be found in the research publications themselves. Below I will mainly focus on the qualitative methodology used to explore social workers' narratives of practice ([JG1], [JG3], [JG5] and [JG 7]). I will also provide a brief commentary about the analysis of the standards mapping undertaken for [JG6].

Taking part: risks and rewards

Research that gets up close to practice requires considerable commitment from participating social workers. They have to set precious time aside in already packed working days, and require managerial support to take part. By consenting to open up the less visible aspects of social work, they are also exposing themselves and their practice to anxiety-provoking scrutiny by the researcher and, ultimately, the wider public (Winter et al., 2017). Identification of workers who might be interested in participating had to be undertaken carefully, ensuring that they knew what was being asked of them, and why. Additionally, because the interest was, for [JG1] and [JG2], framed in terms of 'critical best practice', the concern was to identify practitioners who were perceived by others, such as their managers or training team staff, as skilled workers with something to say about practice. This last criterion of course begs several questions about how 'critical' or 'best' might be defined by different actors, and who has the power to make those judgements. The focus on 'best' may also have put some potential participants off, anxious lest they failed to measure up to some unattainable goal of perfect practice. It was, I found, quite a stretch for many of the interviewed social workers to believe that their practice could approach anything that could be described as

'best', however carefully this was construed as 'best possible' as opposed to 'perfect'. Some of the social workers I interviewed, especially for [JG1], said they were anxious lest they failed to 'come up to scratch' when interviewed, so reassurance that I was not seeking some form of idealised practice was very necessary. I will return to this tricky question of 'best' in the Discussion.

For [JG1] I made use of my own contacts with social service organisations with a particular interest in research and asked them to recommend practitioners who might be interested in taking part. [JG2]'s practitioners were attracted to the Practitioner Pathways to Publication project by an advertisement sent to employers that seconded social work students to the Open University degree programme ([JG2], p.17). Feedback from a brief evaluation of the project found that these social workers were motivated by, firstly, the wish to reflect on a challenging practice experience, and, secondly, by the opportunity to write for publication. Although [JG1] and [JG2] had different foci and outcomes, a similar approach was taken to both, with a fairly long lead-in period, giving time to practitioners to think about whether they wanted to take part, and ensuring that they knew they could terminate their involvement with the research at any time (the same approach was taken by all three of the book's main authors). Interviews, sharing of transcripts and co-writing required a flexible approach, tailored to participants' busy working lives ([JG5, p.30]). The social work student whom I interviewed for [JG7], was, in contrast, well known to me and me to her, because I had previously acted as her practice educator for six months. Whilst there are always unequal power dynamics at play between 'researched' and 'researcher', I needed to take special care that she did not feel under pressure to take part in an interview with the person charged with assessing her practice competence. We only finalised our research plans once she knew that she had passed her placement, and the interview took place after she had received her draft report confirming this.

Involving practitioners in this type of detailed research about practice requires, therefore, a good deal of give and take, and a collaborative

approach which conveys benefit for participant as well as researcher. This partnership ethos also led to the decision that, since the practitioners who contributed to the book had made a significant investment in bringing the research to publication stage, they should have an equal share in authorship. The greatest drawback for practitioners was probably the time consuming nature of this prolonged engagement – a total of three years in the case of the book [JG2-4]. That all but two of the social workers who agreed to take part in the Practitioner Pathways to Publication project, stuck with it, from advertisement through to publication and evaluation, was a testament to their commitment to the research.

The interviews: hearing the story

During my research career I have undertaken many different kinds of interviews and focus groups, mostly based on a semi-structured topic guide. This method of data gathering has dominated qualitative research since at least the 1980s, and, whilst it has useful functions, tends to ‘impose the researcher’s criteria of relevance on the data’ which may not coincide with those of the participant (Froggett and Briggs, 2012, p.2). A critical best practice approach, however, relies on an inductive process whereby understandings and meanings emerge from finely grained practice accounts. The interview style needs to be open-ended and facilitatory, avoiding questions or responses that could prematurely close down or cut across the practitioner’s narrative. Use of a semi-structured topic guide would have placed a ‘straightjacket’ on the ‘kind of inherent rules and processes’ that these practitioners used to think about and plan their work (Marsh and Fisher, 2008, p.978). At the same time, interviews were time-limited and could not afford to be completely unstructured lest we lost sight of the practice issue under discussion, whether that was risk, use of knowledge or practice/theory integration.

Several approaches were used to help to create a useful balance between inclusiveness and purposefulness in the interviews. [JG1] took as its focus

social workers' use of knowledge. A frequent research finding is that social workers find it hard to give a clear account of the knowledge they draw on in their work (Gordon, 2008). Sheldon and Chilvers (2000, p.48) concluded that there was a 'startling' level of ignorance when most of the social workers they asked to name published research or evaluation findings failed to do so. Their underlying assumption was that the practice of these workers was 'passively informed by knowledge that is created elsewhere' ([JG1], p.246). However, my mission was quite different, to find a way to tease out what practitioners saw as informing their practice, knowledge that was often tacit and hidden from view. Eventually, after some unsuccessful experimentation with topic guides, I found a way of adapting a 'knowledge map' developed by Osmond and O'Connor (2006, p.9), which I used as a shared tool to stimulate practitioners' reflections on how they drew on and integrated knowledge for practice. This, combined with the recorded interview, provided a rich data set, and the process of creating the map (the social worker talking, me drawing) helped to make the interviews more of a collaborative endeavour and less of an interrogation.

In [JG7] the Practice Pyramid served as both research focus and a visual means of depicting the relationship between values, theory and practice. Practitioners in both [JG1] and [JG7] were positive about the visual nature of the tool used, one which could be reviewed and added to over time, and kept as a record of the practice experience ([JG7], p.76). The [JG2] interviews were less amenable to a visual method. We wanted practitioners to be able to choose how they told their story in order to maximise its flow and coherence. Therefore, Barry, Andy and I each devised open-ended questions about our chosen topics that we sent to practitioners before the interview. We used variations of these questions during the interviews, where necessary, to guide the telling of the practice story. In practice, we found that, once practitioners started talking, very few prompts were required, such was their interest in talking about their practice.

Analysis: honouring the story

'The people who come to us bring us their stories. They hope they tell them well enough so that we understand the truth of their lives. They hope we know how to interpret their stories correctly. We have to remember that what we hear is their story'.

(Coles, 1989, p.7)

Since a key aim of critical best practice is to represent social work practice in as holistic and accessible a way as possible, an imperative for the analysis stage of research was to keep faith with the story told. However, just as there is no consensus about defining 'a narrative' (Riessman, 2001; Graham, 2017), narrative researchers have assumed very different positions on the extent to which narratives can be said "to speak for themselves". At one end of the spectrum, Atkinson and Silverman (1997, p.322) warn against over-privileging the 'self-revealing speaking subject' by failing to subject narratives to proper analysis, critique and theorising. At the other, Bochner (2001, p.142) stresses the importance of staying *with* the story, and not treating narrative 'as something to go beyond for the good of sociology and its mission'. He suggests that maintaining the integrity of stories requires a great deal of vigilance, and close attention to what is important about the story that is being heard. These contrasting orientations to analysis inevitably reflect their authors' different takes on what knowledge is and how we can come to know it. They extend from Atkinson and Silverman's realism and concern for objectivity, to Bochner's subjective and interpretivist positioning within the broad church of social constructionist thought.

Whatever the approach to analysis, faced with what may be screeds of transcribed talk, there are inevitably choices to be made about what should be conveyed to a wider audience, and how this should be achieved. Mekada Graham, at a recent European Social Work Research conference (2018), described one of the great challenges of narrative analysis as being 'finding a thread to pull on'. With hindsight, I can distinguish two different kinds of thread-pulling I have engaged in during my research. Both take a

constructionist view of the social world, but the first has some realist overtones, and the second is somewhat closer to Bochner's interpretivist stance. [JG1]'s analysis, guided by research questions about knowledge use, required an approach that could identify differences and commonalities about the way that the six social workers used knowledge to inform their particular practice example. The inductive and systematic analysis (see [JG1], pp. 248-9) sought to identify patterns and trends through coding of recurrent themes without losing sight of each story's thread and context. The knowledge maps were incorporated into the analysis, and served as important record of the 'whole story' for each practitioner. In her classification of models of narrative analysis, Riessman (2005), describes this as a thematic analysis, an approach that is useful when the aim is, as in this research, to theorise across a number of cases to identify and report on common themes. My analysis of the student social worker's use of the practice pyramid ([JG7]) could be similarly described, although this analysis allowed the student's story to come over in a fuller way than is evident in [JG1]'s findings.

In contrast, the data collected in the form of stories from the social workers who contributed to the book was not gathered to make generalisations and comparative claims ([JG2]). Their key function was to illuminate the practice of social work through story-telling about practice. However, each chapter is not 'simply' the story told but an analysis of that story by practitioner and researcher, drawing on knowledge about, in Section 2 of the book, which I had lead responsibility for, questions of risk, uncertainty and professional judgement in social work. Importantly, the analysis process, whilst not systematic in the way that characterised that of [JG1] and [JG7], was not undertaken alone. The practitioner and I kept in touch by e-mail and telephone, and our chapter is a product of an iterative process of verification and fine tuning as we combined our practice- and research-based experiences. The practitioner's engagement in research processes is a crucial element of practice-near approaches (Cooper, 2009), and these narratives would have lost much of their richness without it. Riessman (2005, p.4) uses the term 'interactional analysis' to describe the analysis of stories

told through a process of co-construction in which ‘teller and listener create meaning collaboratively’. Although, as I shall go on to explain, these narratives can be regarded as co-constructed, it would be over-stepping the mark to say that analysis was completely collaborative, or free of unequal power dynamics (see Ethical Thinking). Moreover, discrepancies between the co-authors in time, writing experience and investment in the project meant that, perhaps inevitably, it was, as one participant put it, the academic author, in collaboration with the other two academic writers, who did most of the ‘heavy lifting’ once the interviews had been completed ([JG5], p.8).

Puzzles and doubts about fragmentation and coherence, about the whole story and its many parts, are fundamental to any research that draws on people’s narratives. Reason and Rowan (1981, in Johns, 2010) suggest that the notion of ‘coherence’ may serve as a better test than ‘validity’ for researchers drawing on constructionist and interpretivist traditions. A test for coherence leads us to ask questions, such as, can this narrative be trusted by those who speak, read and listen to it? Is it convincing? Does it sound authentic? That I have not found simple answers to these kinds of questions will become evident as we move to ask how, having completed the analysis, a narrative can best be opened up to the scrutiny of the outside world.

Dissemination: writing up and writing down

‘Stories are living things and their real life begins when they start to live in you.’

(Okri, 1997, p 44)

The process of dissemination through published articles, [JG1] and [JG7], was a fairly conventional one whereby I took responsibility for drafting the paper and sought feedback from participants, and, in the case of [JG1], Barry Cooper, who mentored me through what was, at that time, an unfamiliar writing and publication process. Writing for a book designed to showcase critical best practice was a very different matter, and the many interesting questions raised along the way about what story was being told, and who

was telling it are discussed in some detail in [JG3] (pp.18-25) and [JG5]. They illustrate the extent to which we co-construct narratives, and how, like Chinese whispers, stories can change in the telling. There is some inevitability about this – without some smoothing of corners as ‘written down’ words became ‘written up’ stories, the published chapters would have been unwieldy and impenetrable. Jones and Powell (2008, p.55) suggest that, when drawing on live accounts of social work practice, the aim is not to tell the ‘whole story’, but to illustrate practice that is ‘best in a particular context, thereby enabling learning, reflection and the drawing out of key critical themes’. This is what we aimed to do, but taken too far, editing and ‘storifying’ in pursuit of an easily digestible narrative runs the risk of losing some of the complexity, the twists, turns, and untidy endings that make social work so skilful, creative and diverse. One of the aims of critical best practice is to make social work more visible, and to share stories as a resource for learning. Plummer (1995, p. 87, in Riessman, 2001, p.697) stresses that narratives will only flourish if there is an audience, and ‘for communities to hear, there must be stories which weave together their history, their identity, their politics’. So narratives have to engage their audience, but only do so if they are convincing and coherent enough to be a trusted stimulus for dialogue, learning and, potentially, social action.

Thinking ethically

The ethical basis of the book and the five journal articles, including information about ethical approvals sought and gained, is set out within each publication as relevant. In more general terms, I was guided by the Ethics Guidelines of the Social Research Association (2003) and the British Association of Social Work's Code of Ethics (2012). As a registered social worker in Scotland, interviewing other social workers in Scotland and England, I was also mindful of the requirements of the SSSC Codes of Practice (SSSC, 2016), and similar requirements in England. All practitioners who took part in interviews completed written consent forms which set out the purpose and ethical basis for the research ([JG1, 3, 5, 7]).

Talking to social workers about detailed examples of practice inevitably raised ethical dilemmas, some anticipated, some requiring resolution during the research process and some which have become clearer as I write this review. I discuss four inter-related issues germane to nearly all the research below: privacy and confidentiality, research relationships, power and reflexivity, and role ambiguity.

Privacy and confidentiality

It was evident from the start of each qualitative study that the identity of service users, and their friends and families, and any other identifying details, such as their location, had to be fully protected. Measures taken to ensure confidentiality during the research process included the practitioner's selection of a pseudonym for a service user to use in researcher/ practitioner discussions ([JG1, JG2]). Any other identifying details were also removed from interview transcripts before analysis. Anonymising published articles and chapters required considerable thought and negotiation with practitioners to ensure the right balance between confidentiality and conveying an accurate representation of the story told by the social worker ([JG3]). These negotiations had to start from first engagement with practitioners and continued through interviews, confirmation of the accuracy of transcripts of

recorded interviews and production of the stories ([JG2-3, 5]). When necessary, some identifying details such as gender, age and relationship were changed. Where practitioners were named as co-authors, these questions became more pressing, especially in rural areas where social workers and service users may be highly visible. In two instances co-writing social workers elected to write under pseudonyms rather than risk breaching service users' privacy ([JG2]). Named authors were identified as working in England or Scotland, but no further geographical information was provided.

Research relationships

The continuing negotiation about confidentiality described above was part of a wider ethical commitment to developing respectful research relationships with participants. Unlike other research I have conducted, when contacts have been brief, sometimes confined to a single interview or questionnaire response, these relationships had to be built over time. They extended from early negotiations for research access, through discussions about practitioners' chosen practice examples, interviewing and discussion of research transcripts. For social workers taking part in [JG2], the relationships extended further, through chapter writing, publication, and post-publication evaluation. Julkunen and Ruch (2016) emphasise that the manner in which relationships are approached in qualitative research has a significant impact on research quality and outcomes. Sensitive attention to the researcher/participant relationship forms part of an ethical commitment to respecting participants and the stories they, with courage and generosity, bring to the research table. Vigilance is necessary to ensure that these relationships are 'genuinely reciprocal and that practice knowledge and skills are not felt to be somehow secondary to academic knowledge and skills' (Clapton and Daly, 2015, p.395).

Relationships formed with academic co-researchers, critical readers, employing organisations, funders and publishers have formed another significant element of the research. It was important to negotiate access to

organisations at an early stage of each project ([JG1-3, 5, 7]). Lack of line management involvement could well have jeopardised practitioner engagement in the research, particularly when social workers were acting as co-authors. Without this kind of workplace support, social workers struggle to find time and the resources they need to become involved in research and writing (Hardwick and Worsley, 2011; Boddy, Daly and Munch, 2012). It was also possible that a practitioner might reveal concerns about a child or adult's safety, or organisational practices. It was essential to have a direct line of accountability that would allow any concerns of this nature to be relayed to the agency. In practice, this situation has not arisen in any of the research I am reporting on, but systems needed to be in place should this eventuality arise. One of the challenges of this aspect of relationship-building was the fast changing organisational context for practice, so some [JG2] practitioners had several changes of line manager during the research and writing process, requiring rebuilding of these workplace connections. A late change of publishing personnel also threatened another ethical commitment, to the recognition of research participants as co-authors. Another relationship-building exercise was required to convey the centrality of shared authorship to our approach; to change course at this late stage would have constituted a betrayal of the trust placed in us by practitioner participants.

Power and reflexivity

Re-reading my published writing, I am struck by how absent I am from most of it. There is some reflection on power imbalances in researcher/ participant but mine is too often the 'voice from nowhere' (Bochner, 2001, p.138). I find this intriguing, particularly since I spend so much of my day job, as practice educator and part-time university tutor, encouraging and supporting social work students to develop a reflexive approach to their practice. So was this a product of a failure of reflection and reflexivity? Or a perception that questions of power and positioning were not a legitimate focus for published writing? Did I allow my voice to get squeezed out by journal requirements for brief articles? And then there are the fears: of exposure to criticism, of

accusations of narcissism. And, almost certainly, there has lurked a personal anxiety that I am prone to, about being 'too forward', one I can trace back to childhood injunctions about not being 'pushy'. An honest answer is that I am not entirely sure. Probably all these explanations have some purchase.

A social constructionist perspective of narrative demands recognition of the researcher's role as an active participant in the inquiry, and the complex power relations that accompany this positioning (Hertz, 1997). We bring different selves to each research relationship, those that we carry with us into the field, and those that we create as the research unfolds (Reinharz, 1997). A reflexive approach to research, it is argued, provides a means of exploring how our presence, positioning, and perspective shapes our responses to others, and in turn shapes how they respond to us. In this way the 'problem' of subjectivity is transformed into an opportunity for deeper understanding (Finlay, 2002). Reinharz (1997, p.18) proposes that this systematic pursuit of self-understanding is essential if we are to successfully negotiate 'the tension between unreflexive positivism, on the one hand, and navel gazing on the other'. The exercise of 'highly-attuned reflexivity' is particularly crucial in practitioner-led research in which social workers' wide-ranging reflections can lead interviews in all sorts of unanticipated directions (Ruch, 2014, p.2151).

So, what selves did I take into the field? I brought, first my whiteness, middle class background and status as an older, not yet retired, heterosexual woman. Significantly, since much of the research took place in Scotland, I also brought my Englishness and, because I grew up in Oxford, embedded in two generations of my family's university history, an unmistakably middle class 'Oxford accent'. Recent research into identity and the ways in which our personal, social and cultural histories shape the self is revealing the inter-connections between our multiple identities (Graham, 2017). The term 'intersectionality' is increasingly being used to describe how different forms of social stratification, such as race, class and gender, interweave in complex ways to shape and reinforce social inequalities and oppression (Hill Collins,

2015). As a practising social worker, I have always been very aware of the potential impact of my history, accent, language, and demeanour on my relationships with service users and their families, often from very different backgrounds from myself. To an extent, this awareness has contributed to my social work career choices, which have led me to work in settings, such as residential care, long term hospital wards and rehabilitation teams, where there is time to build more lasting relationships, helping to counter the potentially negative impact of such visibly unequal power relations.

A second self – or group of selves – arose from my positioning as a researcher (see also, [JG3]). One of my concerns in all the research I have undertaken has been to narrow the inevitable imbalances of power that exist between researcher and researched. This has been most evident in the Practitioner Pathways to Publishing project ([JG2-4]); participants volunteered to join this project rather than ‘being approached’ and had the opportunity to choose to take a more or less active role from interview planning through to dissemination. However, this somewhat one dimensional view of research power relations is only part of the picture. An intersectional analysis requires a more nuanced understanding of how ‘different identity markers overlay or intersect with each other’ within and between both social and interpersonal relations in different locations and at different times (Dill and Zambrana, 2009, p.11). The way in which my ‘brought’ selves (Reinharz, 1997, p.5) played out in an interview situation depended on a host of interacting factors, which included differences and similarities in gender, location (Scotland and England) and age. During each project I kept research field notes³ which were invaluable in helping me to take a reflexive approach to issues of power, and to attempt incorporate elements of this understanding in the analysis of the research. It would be presumptuous, though, to claim that I therefore had completely unproblematic access to understanding my feelings, my impact on participants, or theirs on me. As Finlay (2002) points

³ Now no longer in existence since they were destroyed, along with interview transcripts, within a year of the research being published, as part of the ethical commitments made at the start of each project.

out, bringing one's self to the fore, especially in unfamiliar research locations with accompanying anxieties about how the research interview will unfold, is far from straightforward. She suggests that 'reflexivity can only be viewed as one way to begin to unravel the richness, contradictions and complexities of intersubjective dynamics' (p.542). Nevertheless, a reflexive approach to power relations, and mindfulness about the impact of one's own power through status, birth and privilege, has to be a key element of a commitment to ethical researching.

Ambiguity: Insider or outsider?

In her grouping of the many selves that she brings to the field, Reinharz (1997, p.5) identifies a third, 'situationally created self'. One of my situational research selves is my identity as a social worker. Although I no longer have day to day accountability as a practitioner, I move in and out of social work settings on a regular basis. I am generally quickly recognised as a social worker, and, even when I am not, I talk and act in ways that betray my professional origins, whether that is through the terminology I use or my familiarity with the things that social workers know and do. I am also aware that I sometimes 'use' this situationally created self to make connections and to try to reduce distance. Like awkward use of humour, researcher attempts to be 'one of us' may constitute defences against anxiety or discomfort about "difference" (Gough, 1999, in Finlay, 2002). I sometimes perceive a degree of inauthenticity in my responses to participants creeping in when I am unsure or nervous.

I am also evidently a researcher. I use language and carry out functions that are not those of most social workers. My family background, accent, language and other markers of privilege and class interact with and intensify this positioning. I sit, therefore, uneasily at times, somewhere between the academy and the field, a position that offers me access to social work settings and opportunities to bridge gaps between research and action. However, there are also disadvantages; insider status can cause researchers

to assume too much, to fail to interrogate shared understandings and to neglect to ask important questions because they think they already know the answer (Brannick and Coglán, 2007). My positioning as researcher/ social worker shifted in different research locations, leaning more to a researcher identity in England, and more to a social work identity in Scotland, especially in the north where I am a known face. Without 'rigorous introspection, integration and reflection' (Ibid, p.69), these ambiguities of identity can threaten the integrity of the research undertaken and undermine the value and coherence of the practitioner's story. When the territory is familiar, even, on the surface, ordinary and predictable, practitioner researchers have, in the language of ethnography, to find ways 'to make the familiar strange' (Ruch, 2016, p. 33). Acknowledging, noticing and reflecting on my insider/ outsider status have brought me some new insights into how I, use, and, sometimes, neglect to notice my different research selves, helping me to reflect on the implications of lack of self-reflexivity may have for research quality.

Like any principled action, and the practice of social work itself, honouring ethical commitments required a good deal of negotiation, difficult decisions, and, sometimes, doubtful compromises which I will continue to explore as I turn now to the research findings.

Research Findings

The individual findings from each research project are summarised within the publications themselves. Below, I summarise and provide a critical commentary about selected key findings, illustrated by examples drawn from interviews with practitioners.

Talking about practice

‘...it is profoundly difficult to explain what work is really like.’

(Pithouse, 1987, p.2)

A common feature of all the interviews with practitioners was how hard they found it to articulate the knowledge they draw on in practice. As one social worker said, poring anxiously over her knowledge map, ‘It’s just so difficult because you know it and just get on with it’ ([JG1], p.249). Often interviews would circle around a topic or a concern for some time before the social worker would land on the right phrase or line of discussion to articulate what they wanted to say ([JG3], p.21). Neither Schön (1983) nor Sennett (2008) would find this surprising. If the embedding of expertise as tacit knowledge is seen as an essential element of quality practice (or craft), then some facets of practice, from subtle movements and gestures to thinking processes, will always be beyond our verbal capabilities. Language is not, Sennett (2008, p.95) argues, ‘an active “mirror tool” for action’. Nevertheless, it was evident from feedback from practitioners who took part in [JG1] and [JG2], that the opportunity to speak in depth about practice was highly valued. This reflection on action also had the potential to bring about new insights into the social worker’s understanding of the practice example described, the researcher acting as a kind of ‘sounding board’ (Winter et al., 2017, p. 14). That these interviews were perceived as an unusual luxury and ‘hugely indulgent’ ([JG5], p.9) by many of the practitioners is a reminder of the dearth of opportunities that many social workers have for in depth case discussion and analysis (Beddoe, 2010). Other benefits described by participants

included an increased critical focus to their subsequent work with families and greater confidence in their knowledge base ([JG1],[JG4],[JG7]).

Critical best practice has been defined as social work that is 'skilfully supportive, therapeutic and challenging of power structures, yet authoritative, and which can be shown to deserve to be called "the best" because it contains aspects of all of these' (Jones et al., 2008, p.2). Most of the research presented here aimed to identify social workers with the capability to practice in this way, although, as suggested earlier, this definition could be interpreted in quite divergent ways. To say that I did indeed encounter practitioners who practised in ways that met this definition, is a circular observation, but is, none the less, the case. Some of the key characteristics of social workers who took part in [JG1] and [JG2] were their evident respect for service users, facility for critical reflection, ability to turn reflection into purposeful and creative action and the capacity to learn from experience. Not all practitioners exhibited all these abilities all of the time, but all did during at least parts of their narrative. These capabilities are described in my writing through practitioners' accounts of practice, but no attempt is made to provide a definitive checklist of 'best practices'. As Winter et al. explain in relation to their practice-near study of social workers' communication with children, 'each encounter is unique to the individuals involved; formed within and shaped by a particular time and space; and informed by broader social, economic, contextual considerations that position children, families and the professional practices of social workers in particular ways' (2017, p.1439). Findings take on a quite different meaning when viewed through this lens, rather than a more positivist approach with a licence to generalise and prescribe standards and behaviours from evidence of good practice. As Parsloe introducing her research on social work teams succinctly put it:

'It was not our intention in the research.. to prescribe, but rather to describe, and perhaps enable teams to exercise more informed choice by being aware of the range of possibilities.'

(Parsloe, 1981, p.14)

Ferguson (2008) has observed that some of the best practice described in critical best practice research involves the use of critical reflection to change course when social workers' assessment of a situation changes, and they have to rethink their approach. For example, the starting point for Jock Mickshik's narrative is when he misreads the strength of emotion at a risk management meeting and jumps in with both feet with 'that professional hat on' ([JG2, p.104). His realisation that he had underestimated 'the wall of dedication, care and commitment' for David, a young man with a severe learning disability, sets the stage for a well-co-ordinated series of imaginative and skilled interventions to reduce the incidence of David's sexualised behaviour which was placing both himself and other children at potential risk of harm ([JG2] pp.102-5).

All the interviews were successful in revealing finely grained detail about how social workers in diverse settings practise, aspects of social work that are rarely shared in the workplace, let alone in more public domains. Discussions with practitioners also demonstrated how their direct work with families interacted with the worker's organisational context. The focus of critical best practice is 'not on idealised images of best practice, but attainable ones within the possibilities of current working realities' (Ibid., p.18). These working realities, including high case loads and scarce resources, were very evident in practitioner accounts. This was a two way street with some practitioners possessing the confidence and agency to, collectively and individually, challenge and bring about change in local practices in order to improve services to individuals and families. Examples of this ability to act, as well as think, critically were evident in, for example, the many ways in which [JG1]'s social workers sought to shift colleagues' attitudes to research-informed practice and Marie Brown's pragmatic challenges of institutional practices that disadvantage looked after children ([JG2], pp.125-37). Marie's determined approach was very evident during this interview,

'I think you have to be quite, not strong in yourself, but you've got to be able to know you won't solve everything...I think you have got to have confidence in yourself.' [JG2, p.135].

Another way of regarding these actions, which often took place under the managerial radar, is as De Certeau's opportunities, 'seized on the wing': ruses and creative tactics that constitute subtle resistance against managerial power (1984, p.xix).

I will return to questions about tensions between individual practitioners' approaches and their organisational context, and what we can learn from the diversity of 'best practices' without resorting to ineffective prescriptions for practice, in my Discussion.

Talking about knowledge

[JG1] identifies the way in which the participating practitioners combined different knowledge sources to make sense of, and intervene in, practice examples they discussed in the interviews (see publication for a more detailed account). They described a very active process of trying out different forms of knowledge for 'best fit' with the circumstances of individuals and families within the unique context in which they found themselves. Personal experience and gut feelings were generally valued, but with some caution and 'had to be set against other knowledge forms to confirm their utility' (Gordon et al., 2009, p.6). A key strength related to workers' understandings of 'how to judge the relevance of different forms of knowledge to practice situations' (Ibid, p. 11). Although there were strong similarities between social workers' descriptions of how they used knowledge, individual knowledge maps varied considerably. This was partly explained by the diverse nature of the practice situations, but social workers also appeared to have preferred theories and other knowledge sources that 'suited' them better than others. This question of worker preferences and their impact on practice is an interesting one and may benefit from further research.

The ability to work with different knowledge forms was also evident when [JG2]'s practitioners were talking about how they drew on knowledge to make judgements about risk (see e.g. [JG2], pp. 107 and 135). Again, the breadth of knowledge that these skilled workers were juggling was sometimes

extensive, according closely with broad definition of evidence-based practice as 'informed by the best available evidence of what is effective, the practice expertise of professionals and the experience and views of social workers' (Barratt and Cook, 2001, in [JG2], p.85). Workers varied in the extent to which they could confidently identify and explain how their knowledge of research supported their practice. Some, like Jock Mickshik, displayed a creative, 'fluent approach' bringing together personal and theoretical knowledge to bear on novel situations (Secker, 1993, p.24-5 in Macaulay, 2000). Others were more anxious and self-conscious when they referred to research, apparently finding it harder to make fluid links between different knowledge forms. This anxiety was probably made more acute by a sense of being scrutinised by a researcher and possibly found wanting. One of the potential pitfalls of narrative interviewing is that participants will tend to respond in ways that they think the researcher wants them to (Ruch, 2014). Another aspect of practice I heard less about was the impact of structural factors, such as poverty and social exclusion, the greatest emphasis usually being on relational aspects of social work. Pithouse, in his ethnographic research, noted, similarly, that the social workers he studied recognised these structural influences but tended to comment on them 'on the way to the "real" issue of family relationships' (1987, p.112).

[JG1] also identified qualities that supported individual practitioners to make fluent use of knowledge in their practice, such as motivation, curiosity and persistence. These capabilities could be both constrained and supported by their organisational context, and the research was able to identify some important organisational capabilities that supported good practice. These included time for reflection, opportunities to co-work and shadow other professionals and forms of supervision that went beyond case management to encourage the worker's professional development. Although [JG2] did not explicitly set out to identify these kinds of capabilities for practice, there are many similarities between the accounts of social workers in the two research projects.

Talking about risk

As Beck (1992) famously said, we live in ‘a risk society’, one in which concerns about safety and dangerousness have come to dominate society. Ironically, modernity, especially science, was meant to reduce risk, but instead, it seems, life has become yet riskier, and we become more fearful (Witkin, 2017). A preoccupation with minimising risk and controlling uncertainty has become a defining feature of 21st Century social work practice. Far from celebrating social practice, the emphasis in western society has increasingly been on avoiding the consequences of failure, and the inevitable media and public outcry when a child or adult comes to harm. In Chapter 7 of the book ([JG2], pp.77-88), ‘Working with Risk: Fine judgements and difficult decisions’, I set out current issues about social work practice and risk of harm to children and young people. These include concerns about the rise of overly cautious, defensive practice based on the premise that ‘*if only* social workers could apply procedures properly’ then abuse of children and adults can somehow be eliminated ([JG2], p.78). This, in turn, creates new risks, as workers increasingly turn to procedural rule-following, fearful of the consequences of taking the initiative in more creative ways (Cree and Wallace, 2009). More recently, we have seen the beginnings of counter-arguments about the life-enhancing benefits of positive risk taking, and the need to build resilience and coping strategies in an inevitably risky world.

Although the four stories of risk in [JG2] involve very different individuals experiencing different kinds of risks in their lives, there were also shared elements that united them (pp.82-8). There was, first of all, a central narrative that described a series of events and incidents that eventually climaxed with a decision, or series of decisions, to act (or not act). Fook (2016, p.170, after Solas, 1996) has summarised the elements of a narrative as ‘coherence, continuity, closure and credibility’. The narratives I heard in interviews included all these elements, telling, with the occasional diversion, stories with defined beginnings, middles and ends, with a strong internal logic. The

interviews also told other, interwoven stories, about how the practitioner viewed their practice (and perhaps wanted it to be viewed by a researcher) and about their particular social, cultural and organisational context. This was not to say that these stories lacked dead ends, reversals and changes of tack, but, in their telling, and re-telling for the purpose of this interview, had probably become neater, less confused and more linear as they had unfolded in real time over weeks and months. Nevertheless, even when the events described had taken place some time ago, practitioners' accounts still captured the roller coaster of mixed emotions attendant on working with children at risk of harm and their families.

When and how social workers respond to risk depends on how risk is constructed, and is strongly influenced by dominant discourses about risk and harm. In essence, 'anything can be a risk; it all depends on how one analyses the danger, considers the event' (Ewald, 1991, p.199, in Witkin, 2017, p.97). Interviews revealed a continuing interaction between the different understandings of risk held by social workers, children, families, organisations and other professionals. In three of the narratives (about David, Grace and Alannah) social workers explained that they had had to be confident and assertive in order to argue against risk-averse organisational policies and attitudes that tended to put safety above all other considerations. In these three accounts team working played a very central role in the practice described, and the ability to work alongside, negotiate with, and sometimes challenge, a range of different professionals was a crucial element of good practice (see [JG2], pp.89-100 for an illustration of team working). At the end of the day, however, when there was a need to 'call time', it was the social worker who tended to initiate and facilitate decision-making and action.

A rather different and less obviously coherent story about decision-making was told about Myra, a young woman whose difficult living circumstances had been allowed to drift for a prolonged period before action was taken ([JG2], pp.113-121). This narrative brought into sharp relief questions about

how differently risks may be constructed by individuals at different times and in different contexts. Clive Rosenthal used his narrative as an opportunity to reflect on whether he had been too slow to use legal powers to intervene to protect Myra from neglect in an increasingly concerning situation. His story tells how social workers have to grapple with questions of power, authority and the balance of care and control. The decision to act to protect one individual rarely brings about unequivocally 'good' outcomes for everyone concerned, so here 'best' practice may be the best that can be achieved for the child in very complex and unhappy circumstances. Forrester et al.'s (2008) practice-near study of how social workers talk to parents has identified how challenging practitioners can find it to raise difficult issues in an authoritative and assertive, and simultaneously empathic, way. When considering the use of statutory powers, the ability to use authority wisely and respectfully in this way came across in these interviews as a key quality for critical best practice.

Finally, despite their retrospective nature, practitioners' accounts had much to say about what it feels like to be a social worker. The stories revealed emotions that are not always recognised or acknowledged in accounts of practice. I witnessed and heard described, emotions of anxiety, uncertainty, delight, impotence, satisfaction, anger, humour and puzzlement during the interviews. Social workers also evidently took pleasure in 'telling the story'. As Jock Mickshik said,

'On a personal level I thoroughly enjoyed the opportunity to reflect deeply and extensively on a single piece of social work and to be able to reflect, in a very safe context, on those aspects of practice that I had got right and those I had got wrong.' ([JG2], p.188)

The reference to a 'safe context' is an interesting one that is picked up by Marie Brown in her interview when she speaks of the importance of 'being held' by support from her team and supervision, so that they do not 'lose the emotional capacity to make risk decisions.' (Ibid, p.136).

Voicing self

In contrast to my other research, [JG6]'s findings draw on desk-based research to provide an account of differences between two sets of social work standards, developed in 2003 and 2013. Many of these differences were reflective of their era, such as the greater emphasis on the role of technology and self-directed support in the more recent standards. The key finding of interest to this review is the increased emphasis on the role of the social worker, as opposed to the tasks performed by social workers, in the more recent standards. The 2013 National Occupational Standards (NOS) for social workers in the UK require social workers in training to develop qualities such as assertiveness, persistence and creativity. The analysis also finds that the "self" and its relationship to practice make regular appearances in the 2013 NOS' ([JG6], p.6). The qualified social worker in the more recent standards is an actor with agency, rather than the 'more or less invisible cipher' in the 2003 standards (Ibid). There is, too, a greater emphasis on criticality, including the need to promote social justice, practice in an anti-discriminatory way and critically reflect on practice. The standards' shift towards a more critical stance, including an expectation that social workers will be confident, assertive and able to articulate their views, also intersects with many of the aspirations of the critical best practice approach. Whether this focus on practitioner, and the 'how' as well as the 'what' and 'why' of social work represents a new dawn or a chimera remains debatable, a subject I will return to in the Discussion. However, this change of positioning of the social worker is noteworthy in the context of what I have argued is a perceptible shift in research interest, from what the social worker achieves to how they do it.

Discussion

Bringing together my work about the social work voice has been an intriguing exercise, revealing connections, puzzles and underlying rationales that were not entirely obvious to me when in the midst of research activity. I will use this discussion to identify and interrogate some of the 'big questions' that have been circling around in my head, and on the page, over the last ten years and more. None of them will be new to social work researchers, and indeed most practitioners, and none have simple answers. However, they are all germane to understanding what it is that attending to the social worker's voice can - and cannot - tell us about social work practice. The four are interconnected, and the order below does not reflect their priority in my research. I will incorporate some discussion about limitations to the research I've conducted and ideas about new areas of inquiry (see also individual submissions).

Science and art

The first assignment I wrote for my social work qualification came back with the words, 'You seem to have successfully thrown off a scientific approach and taken on a social work identity'. I found this puzzling, not feeling at that time that there was anything about my science learning that I needed to 'throw off' in order to be a social worker. Growing up in a household with a social worker mother and scientist father, it had never seemed to me that science was inimical to social work. I understood that science could be intuitive and creative, that realist research findings can contribute to social work practice. Twenty years later, I went back to university, to study a Masters degree in Applied Social Research, and had to take these rather complacent and vague ideas apart. I began to see then that there were important choices to be made, and clarity to be achieved, about what questions are asked, what assumptions are made about reality, and what is counted as knowledge. However, questions about science and art continue to gnaw away at me. I am bothered when science and art are pitched against each other as if neither has anything to tell the other. As I reflect on the last

ten years of research, I also see my perspective shifting somewhat, not to reject science, but to encompass more 'artistic' endeavours, such as research into stories of our lives and those of others, recognising that these not only yield new ways of knowing but also have transformative potential.

Whether framed as a tension between science and art, theory and practice or research and practice wisdom, fierce debates continue to rage about what kinds of evidence can be counted as valid knowledge on which to base social work practice. At the heart of these discussions is what has been described as an 'insoluble paradox' between the drive for consistent and evidence-based standards of care and the need to respond to the unique circumstances and context of the individual (Rawson, 2002, in Gordon, 2008, p.2). A central argument that runs through my work is that the lack of research into the doing of everyday social work continues to hinder our understanding of how social workers practice. This gap has negative consequences for social work education, practice development, policy and public understanding of the profession's role. Further, I claim that doing research that starts with practice opens up the possibility of understanding what ethical, effective social work practice looks like, and using this knowledge to improve practice and, ultimately, the lives of service users and their families.

The counterargument is that this practice-based perspective is too 'unsystematic, impressionistic and idiographic' to be counted as reputable knowledge (Witkin, 2017, p.165). One of the consistent themes of the research presented here, as well as other practice-near research, is that uncertainty, unpredictability and unique contexts are not incidental inconveniences that theory or research can somehow smooth over, but instead are integral to the practice of social work and therefore to researching it. Studying how social workers draw on knowledge, this research supports the view that skilled practice requires the amalgamation of a rich mix of knowledge derived from practice and the academy ([JG1], [JG2], [JG7]). My experience in social work education tells a different story, however, of

students arriving at their first placement expecting to straightforwardly apply what they have learned at university *to practice* ([JG7], p. 66). That this dichotomy between knowledge generation in the academy and knowledge use in practice breaks down almost as soon as the student steps through the office door, is an unsettling and puzzling experience for many. Students' confusion is further compounded by academic assessments that regularly invite them to 'name and apply a theory to practice'. Research tells us that social workers need to 'feel able to respond openly and flexibly' rather than trying to fit themselves and service users into 'a particular approach that is currently de rigueur in social work' (Winter et al., 2017, p.17). No wonder then that social workers are sometimes dismissive of theoretical, research-generated knowledge ('You can forget all that now you've qualified'..) when they complete their qualifying training (Grady and Keenan, 2014).

It is tempting, therefore, to take England's view that social work is an artistic endeavour, one that, he argues, can only be properly understood through the lens of the worker's 'intuitive use of self' (1986, p.32). This use of self is seen as extending far beyond most of the definitions discussed in [JG6], being the principal determinant of the practitioner's professional character and behaviour. This perspective leads England in some similar directions to my research, and that of other practice-near researchers, in its stress on the need for 'the personal and concrete in social work literature', and the evaluation of the quality of social work practice through practice itself (Ibid, p.139). England's focus is on the aesthetics of practice, on intuition, creativity and self-expression, pitched against the stifling forces of hard empiricism, proceduralism and managerialism. Although I find England's analysis persuasive, the practitioner narratives I have listened to speak to a more complex, iterative process of movement between personal and professional experience and sources of, often empirically derived, knowledge that they incorporate into their understanding of each new encounter. While intuition and creativity are important qualities, there are others that speak to skilled workers' determination, assertiveness and negotiating powers, all capabilities that make use of self but do not fit comfortably into England's aesthetically-

focused conception of art. Moreover, as Gray and Webb point out, England's analysis neglects to take account of the relationship between 'the virtuous social worker doing all the right things' and the broader context of practice (2008, p.183). The worker's use of self and ability to make an empathic connection with a service user cannot be neatly separated out from considerations of culture, structural issues, power differentials, professional requirements, agency accountability and social policy. Critical best practice attempts to deal with this complex relationship by focusing on both the practitioner's role and their practice in context. Nevertheless, I have encountered some tensions between the 'best practice' of the identified practitioner and the approach's ambition to take a critical approach to practice-in-context that I will return to later in this Discussion.

Although debates about epistemology, a vital part of our critical heritage, never go away, I find polarised thinking about whether social work is a science or an art unproductive. I tend to Shaw's view that we should be open-minded in recognising the creativity and search for understanding that is inherent to both disciplines (2018, p.8). However, whether social work is seen as an art or a science, it seems evident that we need to find 'different means of evaluating it than if it was only a science' (Gray and Webb, 2008, p. 185). The growing movement to generate evidence from practice provides a way of crossing bridges. If we grant that valid knowledge can emerge from practice itself, then the science-art, theory-practice split begins to melt away. Further, if we can use research to gain a better understanding of the complex ways in which social workers use theoretical knowledge to make active interpretations and professional judgements, then we also begin to tease out how theory and practice act on each other. Seeing the relationship as a two-way street also prevents a retreat towards taking overly simplistic and a-theoretical stances. Breaking down barriers does not mean throwing out the theory with the bathwater, but 'retaining theoretical rigour whilst embracing divergent perspectives' (Ruch, 2014, p.2148).

If we are to move towards a more 'bottom up' understanding of what it is to practice in an 'evidence-based' way, then I believe that we have to work harder at establishing the credibility of practice-near research in all its forms. The case must be made for using what we learn from detailed, situated explorations of practice to illuminate social work practice in other contexts. Cooper (2009, p.432) suggests that, 'the closer one comes to a single case the more its uniqueness and particularity demands to be understood, but equally the more its value for the illumination of all other cases with which there is a family resemblance becomes evident'.

Critical and best

One of the peer reviewers of our co-authored book questioned whether critical best practice can be considered 'a theory'. I have concluded that it is not. I see the approach more as a sense-making framework, although, admittedly, sometimes I have found it hard to make sense of. When so much social work talk and literature is constructed around problems, failings and tragedies, I am attracted by the potential for optimism and celebration of practice that critical best practice offers. Recently, I used one of the narratives of practice in [JG2] to develop a student activity for a postgraduate social work course. One of the module's critical reviewers wrote: 'This is a useful exercise, but unfortunately the practices described are no longer possible in the UK due to neoliberalism and austerity'. This conveyed to me a kind of passive fatalism, a sense that good social work practice has become impossible, that practitioners no longer have agency to resist, to challenge, to negotiate in the current organisational climate. I am all too familiar with these barriers to good practice, but the reviewer's perspective is very far from my experience as a practice educator and researcher. So, I want social workers' voices to be heard, to show just what the social work profession can achieve, as well as the conditions that impede good practice. But I have, sometimes, found it difficult to reconcile 'critical' and 'best' within the narrative tradition.

What constitutes 'best' in social work practice is bound to be open to contest and debate, being a product of time, place and who is making that assessment (Ferguson, 2003; [JG1], [JG3], pp. 16-18). To re-iterate, one of the aims of the critical best practice approach is to share and analyse stories about what social work looks like when done well, and to counter the profession's 'deficit culture'. The approach's vision of 'best' practice is not idealised, de-contextualised practice but practice that is rooted in a particular cultural, geographical, historical, political and economic location. This practice is defined as the 'best' that can be achieved at that time and in that context and there are no pre-determined 'right' or 'wrong' practices or outcomes. So there is no single model of what good practice looks like, and, viewed from different perspectives, for example those of service users, social workers and employers, 'best' practice could be described in many different ways. The question of what is 'best' (and whether we can describe any practice as 'best') presents a number of philosophical and methodological problems.

The first is that the expression, 'best practice', has, in the 15 years since Ferguson developed the approach, assumed some particularly negative connotations in social work education and practice. 'Best practice' has come to be associated with neoliberalism and bureaucracy, and prescriptive, reductionist, depersonalising approaches to 'what works' in social work practice. Bauman (1993) identifies humans as fundamentally moral beings whose capacity for moral thought and action – their 'moral impulse' and intrinsic concern for 'the other' is actively undermined by the 'straightjacket' of modernity's rule-setting and standardisation. Smith's analysis of the value of Bauman's work for modern social work concludes that social workers need to 'give up on the quest for elusive best practice and step into uncertainty...to become reflexive and morally active practitioners' (2011, p.15). Critical best practice takes an explicitly contrary stance, emphasising practice in context, and the 'best possible practice' in what are understood to be messy, unpredictable circumstances. However, it is easy to see how its focus on 'best' is, at the very least, open to misinterpretation, and even misuse.

Different interpretations of 'best' inevitably pervade the whole research process, from identification of participants to readers' responses to the idea of 'best practice'. For example, potential research participants for [JG1] were identified by their employers, usually a member of their organisation's training and development team. If practitioners are perceived to be 'best' because they are obedient and unreflexive rule-followers, then the attempt to represent practice that is 'critical' is bound to fail.

A second potential problem returns to the questions I posed earlier about what it is we understood by 'practice'. Although critical best practice is ostensibly about 'the best practice', it takes as its subject and principal source the social worker. So what is being studied? Is our main interest in the practice context or the practitioner? Clearly the two cannot be neatly separated, but different answers can be given to the question depending on one's philosophical standpoint. A focus on what might be the 'good outcomes' of the social worker's actions would arise from a normative ethical standpoint such as consequentialism, which assesses 'goodness' on the basis of whether it achieves the greatest good for the greatest number of people. If, instead, we regard morality as located in personal characteristics of the social worker, then our theoretical stance is likely to be more aligned with philosophers, like Aristotle, who espoused virtue ethics; a 'good' or virtuous social worker will be likely 'to do the right thing' (Smith, 2018). Alternatively, a care (or feminist) ethics will switch attention to relational virtues such as care and benevolence, and the inter-dependencies of people who are cared for and those that care for them (Gilligan, 1982). In practice, social workers I listened to described the complexities of attending very closely to unique encounters with families while simultaneously managing their relationships with the more bureaucratic and regulatory context for their practice, including their relationships with their employer and inter-professional colleagues, and their procedural and legal responsibilities. Hingley-Jones and Ruch (2016) have suggested that a relationship-based model of best practice requires a holding of these 'professional binaries' in 'a creative tension', rather than set in opposition. This is essentially what critical

best practice appears to set out to do, but, in its rather broad affiliations to strengths-based, narrative, and critical theories, it lacks a unified theoretical basis to guide the researcher when their research throws up ambiguities and contradictions. Some of the limitations and challenges of critical best practice are raised and discussed in a general sense in [JG3] (pp.5-7) but these will become clearer through explanation of the tensions played out relation to one of the narratives in [JG2], Clive Rosenthal's⁴ story about 'Myra'.

Evidently, critical best practice requires researchers to have some clarity about what they might expect to see, feel and hear when they communicate with practitioners. Ferguson's recent summing up of the approach tells us that 'best practice' will see social workers reflecting critically 'in a theoretically informed way that is both skilful and deeply respectful to service users, being mindful of their often marginalised social position and vulnerability, while at the same time using key skills, judgement and what I call "good authority"' (2013, p.117). So critical best practice, though it can be demonstrated in many different ways, does stand for *something* – there are ways of describing what it is in general terms. Moreover, despite its social constructionist origins, the approach does not require us to accept a completely unbounded, uncertain world in which no judgements can or should be made about the quality of a social worker's practice.

Clive's was a difficult story to tell, and to hear. As it unravelled, it revealed a classically disheartening tale of drift, of historical attempts to bring about change that failed, of changes of social worker, lack of decisive action and missed opportunities. Whereas the other three practitioners I interviewed for [JG2] seemed clear about the main 'storyline' in their practice accounts, Clive appeared less sure and his narrative wove around in ways that I sometimes found hard to follow. That it did so was perhaps unsurprising – Myra's was not a 'tidy' story even by social work standards – but, as the interview progressed, I began to wonder whether what I was hearing met Ferguson's definition of 'best practice'. In particular, I perceived a certain lack of critical

⁴ Clive chose to use a pseudonym when this narrative was published.

reflexivity, and wondered how best I should respond to this. With my practice educator 'hat' on, I knew very well what kinds of questions to ask to try to shift the interview into a more reflective gear. However, I was not here as an educator, but as a researcher, and with a brief to listen and use questions as occasional prompts to help keep the story focused on Clive and how he conceptualised his practice.

At a point when I was beginning to lose confidence in myself, and the ambitious project that I and my colleagues had recently embarked upon (this was my first interview for the book), the tone of the interview changed. Clive said, 'I think, with hindsight, maybe we should have looked at accommodating Myra earlier' ([JG2], p.122). This signalled a shift into a different kind of conversation, in which Clive was critiquing his practice within an organisational culture that had been far from effective in supporting him to take action. The narrative became a new story: one that fell into two halves, before and after Clive initiated the actions that led to Myra being accommodated. I later discussed the transcript of the interview with my co-authors, who expressed the same doubts I had about the extent of critical reflection demonstrated. However, we eventually agreed that this was a narrative that could be regarded as 'best' because of Clive's recognition that he needed to move his practice focus from repairing broken family relationships to working in a more active way with colleagues to prioritise Myra's welfare. It was this story that our chapter in the book eventually told, though I believe it to lack the imaginative, questioning and challenging approach that I perceive to be at the heart of the other three practice narratives I heard. Should Clive's narrative have been included in book devoted to 'critical best practice'? The dilemmas faced in its journey from conception to publication will help to flesh out a number of important questions, about what we mean by 'critical', about authorial power and reflexivity and about shared publication. All are germane to critical best practice inquiry and the development of research relationships, as well as to many kinds of narrative inquiry.

Firstly, in the published chapter, decisions about which parts of Clive's interview could be considered 'critical' in nature were essentially made by me, with the support of my two co-authors. This did not mean that Clive had no role in writing his chapter – far from it – but I was exerting a good deal of my power as the 'academic' researcher by making the case to Clive about what story could most effectively be told and how this should be framed (see also [JG3], pp. 16-27). I found this uncomfortable, and inconsistent with the spirit of a critical inquiry method that takes disparities of power seriously and seeks ways to challenge unequal relations.

Secondly, when I reflect on the four research interviews carried out for the book, I find I that have a strong recall of the emotional climate. For example, Jock's interview was imbued with an upbeat sense of energy and hope, whereas during a group interview ([JG2], pp. 89-100) I felt somewhat removed from the team dynamic and became more of an observer. My interview with Clive was much lower key, almost depressed, and I remember feeling great discouragement about the apparent hopelessness of Myra's situation and the ineffectiveness of social work and other services to reach out and support her. Cooper (2009) suggests that, because good practice-near research essentially emerges from researchers' engagement with participants, we have to be open to understanding what subjective forces are at play. Anxious about this first interview and worried about whether it would 'make' a book chapter, I can see that I failed to acknowledge the impact of my feelings on the interview, and this may have contributed to the way it unfolded. This more subjective account is not visible in the chapter I wrote with Clive, and did not form a part of the discussions Clive and I had about the book chapter. This raises a final question about whether the nature of the Pathways to Practitioner Publication project, which aimed to enable practitioners to write for publication, made it more difficult for me to initiate conversations about whether a narrative was sufficiently critical in nature to be published.

Despite these doubts, which, in smaller ways, have attended all my critical best practice research, my long view that Clive's chapter is a telling one for social workers working in situations that may seem hopeless or never-ending. It demonstrates both the positive potential for use of authority in social work, and the ability social workers have to make a difference. However, with some distance from this research, I wonder whether taking a critical best practice approach was a help or a hindrance to hearing and sharing this particular story. I remain committed to the idea that practitioners should be supported to research and to write for publication (see [JG5]), particularly because of the personal challenges I experienced attempting to do so when I was an employed social worker. Carrying this ambition to fruition is not, however, a simple matter; even with careful negotiation, some uncomfortable compromises may have to be made.

Near and far

Practice-near research encompasses a wide range of different research methodologies that have the shared aim of getting close to where practice, whether that is of an individual worker, team or organisation, actually happens. There are evidently varying degrees of nearness, from ethnographic approaches that accompany social workers in their everyday work, through video-stimulated recall, responses to practice vignettes to narratives of practice. Within this continuum, the research I have conducted with colleagues is probably furthest from practice, removed by time, memory and the changes that take place as stories are reflected on, told and re-told. Whilst emotions and body language form an important element of practice narratives, they refer to the told story, and lack the upfront immediacy of body movements, expressions and visceral nature of ethnographic study.

The use of narratives of practice has been critiqued for their tendency to obscure practice realities, so that they only tell part a part of the story that could have been told about the practice (Forrester and Harwin, 2011; Ferguson, 2017; Westlake and Jones, 2017). This is undoubtedly so; the

narrative heard on the day is just one version of the story that could be told about practice, and could be very differently told by the service user, or indeed the same social worker on a different day. Workers will not, by definition, have easy access to actions and beliefs that are unconscious, or to feelings that are repressed or quickly forgotten as they move on to the next home visit. Reflecting on our actions can be especially problematic when we are defending ourselves against powerful emotions stirred up by highly charged practice encounters (Ferguson, 2018). Our 'remembered selves' are also subject to conscious or unconscious processes of selection by an 'editorial self', to reveal different versions of ourselves in different contexts (Albright, 1994, p.32-3, in Jones, 2010, p.267). Evidently there can be no simple correspondence between a narrative and the feelings, actions and events that provoked its telling.

I would still, nevertheless, argue for the place of the narrative in the lexicon of practice-near research. As with any research, it all depends what question one is answering. Narratives have their limitations. They will not tell us just how the practice occurred, and so cannot be used for analysing the minutiae of practice itself (Westlake, 2015). Narratives instead allow us a different kind of access to social workers' thought processes and the kinds of real world reflection, analysis, summarising and tidying up of troubling ends that goes on between the home visit and the assessment report, or summary of progress at a review. Unlike most ethnographic work conducted to date, they also illuminate the twists and turns in how social work practice takes place over time, sometimes in the kinds of sensitive and challenging situations that may be difficult to get close to in practice. Finally, these narratives have another job to do, to engage social workers and others in fruitful debates about the experience of social work on the ground (Jones and Watson, 2013). The texts provide an invitation to readers to find their own meaning by juxtaposing and interrogating their experiences alongside the narrator's. In this way, 'a story's generalisability is always being tested – not in the traditional way through a random sample of respondents but by readers as

they determine if a story speaks to them about their experience or about the lives of others they know' (Ellis, 2004, p.194-5).

Regulation and agency

UK social work training was restructured on a competence-based model during the 1990s (see [JG6] for a fuller discussion). Once qualified, there are further standards to be met, for example, during social workers' first year in practice. As described earlier, there has been a discernible shift from a task focus to a practitioner focus in the social work 2013 NOS. The standards now appear to give more credence to, for example, relationship-based practice, use of self, criticality and challenge of oppressive practices. These might seem to be encouraging moves, but these changes have been made in an otherwise unsympathetic, managerialist and resource-starved climate for practice. Reflexive practitioners, Smith (2011, p.15) argues, must be able to attend to 'that unruly voice of conscience' and to be prepared to 'break the rules when those rules do not act in favour of those they work with'. Unless the new standards are regarded as a trigger for bringing about change in the context for practice, they risk heightening the dissonance between the practitioner's drive to do the job well (Cree and Davis, 2007), an organisational context that requires rule-following, and standards that advocate rule-challenging through critical reflexivity and action. Without a practice-based understanding of how students and social workers manage these kinds of tensions between regulation and agency the new standards will be subject to the same sustained critiques as previous competency-based prescriptions (see also [JG8], pp 192-3; Domakin and Forrester, 2017). Moreover, if we are serious in our intent that social workers' competency to make use of self or to reflect on action we require clarity about what these highly nuanced and complex skills look, feel and sound like in practice ([JG7] pp. 596-600; Ferguson, 2018).

This discussion has pulled in two, apparently opposing, directions. Whilst continuing to argue for practice-based research that privileges the voices of practitioners, I have raised a number of questions about the theoretical and methodological basis for the research that I have been engaged in over the last ten years. In the next part of the review I will be emphasising the former argument, and outlining the contribution I believe I have made to social work research. My misgivings will play an important role when I move on to an appraisal of the past and my plans for the future.

Contribution to research, learning and professional development

Occupying a somewhat liminal position between academia and social work practice, it is unsurprising that my primary interest is in applied research. I find myself constantly asking the question, how would a social worker, or student, make use of that finding, or this perspective in their day to day practice? And what difference would it make if they did? Below I assess the contribution that I believe the presented research makes to social work policy, practice, research and learning.

Social work theory and research

When Harry Ferguson started developing ideas about critical best practice, he saw his longer term aim as one of developing ‘a knowledge base out of the best work that is already going on’ (2003, p.1021). The research I have undertaken, solely, and in collaborated with others, seeks to add to and build on this body of work (Jones et al., 2008; Jones and Watson, 2013). More specifically, the research interrogates best practice in knowledge use and generation, revealing different ways of ‘knowing practice’ from those that rely on ‘delivering knowledge to the practitioner though prescribed procedures or “off the peg” social work techniques’ ([JG1], p.255). The knowledge mapping method I developed for [JG1] has been taken up by a university social work programme for student use. Another development of the approach has been the study of how practitioners approach risk in everyday practice ([JG2]). Numerous investigations have been undertaken, and reports written, about professional responses to child and adult abuse in exceptional cases, but we know much less about what happens when social workers intervene to prevent and respond to risk of harm in their everyday work. The narratives of social workers add to a growing knowledge base derived from practice-near ethnography, especially in child protection and children’s services (see, for example, Ruch, 2014; Ferguson, 2017). Practice-based research of this kind offers opportunities to develop good practice models that recognise the

complexity and contingent nature of much of the daily practice of social work (Jones et al., 2008; Winter et al., 2017).

The research also contributes to a narrative tradition of social work literature, joining a small, but, again, growing body of literature that takes as its subject the experiences, biographies and professional practices of social workers (see, for example, Cree, 2013; Witkin, 2014). Cree (2007, p.8) suggests that narratives of this kind offer a potentially transformative means of researching the diversity of social workers' lives and practices. In addition, the small-scale evaluation of the Pathways to Practitioner Publication initiative identified a number of positive outcomes. The project generated a book, interest from involved social workers in further research and writing, and some key messages for practitioners and researchers wishing to pursue similar collaborations ([JG5]).

Learning and development

'A social work literature will play a significant part in future change. It will also mean that social workers can at last look forward to the possibility of a good read.'

(England, 1986, p.205)

During the evaluation of the Practitioner Pathways to Publication [JG7] project one of the participants identified her frustration, as a social work student and then newly qualified worker, with 'the dearth of literature which actually explained how I should engage, often with the most reluctant of families' ([JG4], p.187). Instead, social work literature tends to be dominated by 'accounts of practice in terms of typologies or schools of thought' (Broadhurst and Mason, 2014, p.586), and pays insufficient attention to the challenges of working with involuntary service users, for many social workers the primary focus of their practice (Ferguson, 2011). The accounts of practice I have helped to generate offer a potentially valuable learning resource for students and social workers because they are about recognisable social work in familiar settings. They do not seek to minimise the constraints and

difficulties of practice, but do provide access to what can go right, and be put right, in social work without apportioning blame or prescriptively detailing what should not be done. Critical best practice narratives offer a stimulus to teasing out and critiquing the human relations and actions that enable good practice to happen (see also [JG3], pp.2-4).

During their training and continuous professional development activities social workers are required to write critically and reflectively about their practice. They often find this difficult to do, partly because there are few published exemplars that demonstrate what critical reflection on social work practice actually looks like. In [JG4], we identify the benefits of access to 'a bank of stories of practice underpinned by reflective and critical thought' with the potential to support social workers' ability to write about their practice (p.192). There is also a hidden treasure trove of reflective practitioner writing about good practice, produced for evidential and assessment purposes, which could be disseminated more widely and used for learning purposes. My evidence for the usefulness of grounded narratives of practice for students is anecdotal, coming from students I have taught and supervised, and social workers engaged in continuing professional development. It would be useful, I believe, to evaluate the benefits of – and any difficulties arising from – using practice-near accounts to support the learning social workers and other professionals.

The practice pyramid is a relatively well-known tool in practice education in Scotland, but less known elsewhere, so part of the evaluation's aim was to encourage its wider use in social work education by demonstration of its potential. The utility of this kind of theory/practice integration method has been strengthened by evidence from [JG1] and [JG2], which provides support for an iterative, inclusive model of knowledge use that seeks to combine different knowledge sources in a systematic, but fluid and evolving, way. The findings from [JG7], and feedback from practice educators and students, have so far been positive, but more extensive evaluation is required. Another finding from both these studies was that even apparently

very skilled practitioners may struggle to articulate their use of knowledge, especially theoretical and research-based knowledge embedded in their day to day practice expertise. 'Talking practice' is a key skill for social workers, most visibly when they are asked to justify life-changing decisions, such as taking legal action to protect children or adults, but necessary for any assessment, planning or intervention in the lives of others (Gordon et al., 2009). This gives rise to questions about how qualifying and post-qualifying social work education can better promote and develop this knowledge, by, for example, modelling good practice and providing opportunities to rehearse the acquisition of these skills in spoken as well as written form.

Policy and practice

One of the reasons for studying social work practice *in situ* is to understand if and how policy is translated into practice in the workplace. Conversely, we need to understand how practice happens if we are going to have useful policies. Practice-near research has repeatedly identified serious mismatches between policy and practice, based on mistaken assumptions and lack of shared understanding of some of the most fundamental aspects of social work practice (see, for example, Ruch et al., 2017 on communication, and Messmer and Hitzler, 2008, on care planning and decision-making). Gaining an understanding of how social workers conceive of and respond to risk, and integrate knowledge in practice, is an important step on the way to developing effective and relevant education and practice policies. A more concrete example of policy influence is provided by the desk research that informed the NOS comparison (Dunworth and Gordon, 2014; [JG6]). Its recommendations for embedding a more explicit focus on relationship-focused practice, use of self, critical reflection and learning from experience in standards in Scotland have been adopted by Scotland's Review of the Social Work Degree. A further proposal, that increased emphasis should be placed on sometimes hidden, but vital principles and values that underpin ethical, respectful social work practice, has also been adopted. As discussed

earlier, however, it remains to see whether these positive ambitions will be realised in practice.

Valuing social work

The published writing presented for this degree differs from most of the research I undertake as a consultant, often employed on time-limited contracts with pressing deadlines. In contrast, this writing is mostly un-commissioned and unpaid, enabling me to research and write about subjects that have meaning for me. My strong belief that social workers should be listened to and valued motivates and sustains my wish to continue researching. In a climate of shrinking resources, increasing managerialism and bureaucratisation, it can be difficult to hold on to a positive image of social work. The rise of radical social work, with its focus on structural issues and critique of oppression in all its many forms, has had many benefits, but has also contributed to a belief within the profession that 'there is always something inherently wrong with social work, that practice is never (quite) good enough' (Ferguson, 2003, p. 1007). In this kind of atmosphere it is, arguably, hard for social workers to feel confident and positive about the profession or their own role within it.

There is a discourse within the profession that would suggest that social workers 'never' get to see service users, that 'all' social work is about these days is entering information into a computer. Of course, like all discourses, these bald statements tell an important story that needs to be taken seriously, and there is plenty of research evidence of the detrimental impact of current workplace practices on relationship-based practice (Pithouse et al., 2012; Broadhurst and Mason, 2014). But there is also another one, that skilful work continues to be done with service users and their families, often in difficult circumstances. This is not about pretending, Pollyanna-like, that there are not problems, constraints, bureaucracy, oppression and inequality, but recognising that situations and people can be construed in different ways. When we adopt a strengths-based perspective, Witkin suggests, we also

invite new, hopeful stories and refocus 'our attention toward heretofore unrecognised resources' (2017, p.155). I hope that the narratives I have been involved in gathering and disseminating help, in however small a way, to convey a sense of optimism about what social workers are capable of, and the value of the profession's work. This is important if we are to attract new social workers into the profession, and so that practitioners and policy-makers gain a better understanding of the role and untapped potential of social work services. A wider ambition is to make social work more visible, so that the general public gains a more realistic understanding of what social workers can, and cannot achieve for society. There are no quick fixes to changing attitudes, but we can, I think, start by using practice-based research knowledge, to have conversations about what good practice in social work looks like.

So, back to that question:

'So, what do you do?'

'I'm a social worker'

'That must be a very stressful job...'

'Wait...let me tell you a story...'

Looking back and looking forward

I have been gearing up to write a conclusion, and, as I approach the end of this critical review, increasingly unsure what it should say. I am, with difficulty, resisting my usual inclination to tie up ends and impose order. My reflections on self and my research have generated new questions that have made my thinking less tidy and created new uncertainties. After all, I wanted this review to make me think, and it has. Now that I have got here, I can see that this point is more of a staging post than an ending, a point at which to pause, reflect and look ahead. My aim, therefore, is to end by drawing together the threads of my discussions in order to review my learning, about research and about myself. I will identify gaps, limitations and some new questions, and consider future paths for research and my own development as a researcher. Each of the research publications also sets out conclusions and limitations related to the particular topic under study.

The overarching aim of my work has been to gain a better understanding of how we can learn about and improve social work practice by listening to social workers' voices. The research, in collaboration with practitioners and other researchers in the academy, has, as outlined, made a contribution to this endeavour, by sharing narratives of practice and through specific inquiries into aspects of practice, related to knowledge, risk and practice/theory integration. The critical best practice approach has provided an important stimulus and conceptual framework for this work, although, as described, combining 'critical' and 'best' in a single approach has given rise to theoretical, ethical and methodological contradictions and some unresolved dilemmas. There have also been many changes in the political, economic and social climate for social work practice since I wrote the first paper on which this submission is based. Expressions such as 'evidence-based' and 'best' practice have increasingly become associated with late modernist developments including increasing managerialism, rational-technological approaches and regulation. These changes of context are evident when I compare the language and tone of my earlier and more recent

writing, with the result that some of the first writing now seems less relevant. The time that has elapsed since I embarked on the research has given rise to other limitations. Undoubtedly, there is much that I cannot now recall, and the field notes and transcripts that might have helped me do so no longer exist. This critical review has also identified for me avenues of research that I failed to pursue. In particular, I notice insufficient attention to language, to the expression of voice, in my work as well as a need to take a more critical and reflexive approach to recognising the impact of emotions, inequality and power on research relationships, processes and outcomes.

Over the course of the last ten years, I am able to perceive a gradual shift in my thinking about what can be counted as knowledge. I have tried to make my reflections on these changing ideas and perceptions visible in this review, as well as to make apparent the theoretical, methodological, and ethical dilemmas and doubts that have helped to inform these changes. I have become increasingly aware of the potential for use of more wide-ranging, expressive, evocative and engaging ways of understanding and sharing social workers' voices. I am becoming interested in research that draws on interpretative ethnographic, literary and autoethnographic methodologies that I would, I believe, have regarded with some doubt, and even suspicion, ten years ago. This shift is closely associated with my growing appreciation of the potential for stories to provide us with different ways of seeing and their power to 'combat invisibility and domination' (Hancock, 2016, p.2). Stories, including the story I tell in this critical review, offer a means of learning about the lives of others and, at the same time, learning about ourselves, as we read or listen to them.

As much as I have learned from immersing myself in the critical best practice approach, I now see myself moving towards a greater focus on the theory and practice of narrative research. Noticing now how I have struggled, at times quite unexpectedly, with reflexivity, and its representation through research, undertaking this review has been instructive, suggesting new directions for my learning about research and self. Beyond these more

personal ambitions, I see continuing potential for accessing and sharing narratives of practice, both to convey the breadth of social work practice, and in order to contribute to debates and comparative studies about the experience and value of social work within the UK and internationally (see also [JG3], p.192-3). It is notable that, 50 years after 'The Client Speaks' (Mayer and Timms, 1970), there are, with some important exceptions, still few studies that simultaneously attend to the perspectives of social workers and service users. Ultimately, the purpose of listening to social workers' voices is to improve practice, and for that, we have to listen just as closely to what service users and carers have to tell us about their experience of everyday social work practice.

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Appendix 1: Summary of published work

The published writing is briefly summarised below. All submissions were peer-reviewed by at least two reviewers before acceptance. Each is numbered and these references are used to refer to relevant sources in the critical review's text. Page numbers in the critical review refer to those of the original articles.

Publication 1 [JG1]

Gordon, J. and Cooper, B. (2010) 'Talking knowledge – Practising knowledge: A critical best practice approach to how social workers understand and use knowledge in practice', *Practice: Social work in Action*, 22(4), 245-257.

Linked to:

Gordon, J. (2008) *Evidence in Practice: A critical best practice investigation into how practitioners understand, use, and learn from, research, inquiry, and other forms of knowledge in social work practice in Scotland: Brief Literature Review*, Milton Keynes, The Open University

<https://www.researchgate.net/publication/242169980> [Accessed online 26.5.18]

Gordon, J., Cooper, B. and Dumbleton, S. (2009) *How do social workers use evidence in practice? Final Report*, Milton Keynes, The Open University

<http://oro.open.ac.uk/23097/> [Accessed online 6.2.18]

Role: Researcher and lead author

Summary: The research on which this paper is based was conducted with funding from HEFCE (Higher Education Funding Council for England) through The Open University's Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (Open CETL). Open CETL supported innovative research into practice-based learning.

The research consisted of a small scale critical best practice inquiry into how social workers understand and make use of knowledge in their day to day practice. Two linked, but not peer-reviewed papers, are linked to the research, a literature review (Gordon, 2008) and a Final Report for Open CETL. During the research six social workers, practising in Scotland, constructed visual 'knowledge maps', representing their use of knowledge in their work with service users and their families. The findings identify practitioner skills in combining and critiquing a varied range of knowledge sources, and practitioner and organisational capabilities for effective knowledge use in practice.

Impact and dissemination: The paper won First Prize in the Open CETL Practice-based Learning Best Publication Award. I reported on the research at five conference workshops: The Open University [2009 and 2011], ASET [2009], The European Association for Practitioner Research on Improving Learning (EAPRIL) [2009] and the Ninth International Practice Teaching Conference [2011].

Publication 2 [JG2]

Cooper, B., Gordon, J. and Rixon, A. (2015) Best Practice with Children and Families: Critical social work stories, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan: Part 2, 75-137.

Role: Researcher, book author, and sole / lead author

Summary: The book aims to capture and analyse the experiences of social workers working in a wide range of settings with children and families (see also: [JG3], [JG4]). Informed by critical best practice and narrative approaches, it presents ten stories of social work practice with children and families. The five chapters in this section together address questions of risk, professional judgement and uncertainty in social work practice. Chapter 7 provides an introduction to the topic through the literature and discussion of

different understandings of risk and to four interviews with practitioners. Chapters 8-11 offer detailed descriptions and analysis of actual social work practice with service users and their families. Chapter 8 is based on a group interview with a team of workers: two practitioners, a social work manager and a foster carer. Chapters 9-11 are each based on an interview with a single social worker.

Impact and dissemination: Chapters from the book, including two from Part II, are now included in the curriculum for students undertaking the Degree and Post-graduate Diploma in Social Work at The Open University. Two book launches, in England and Scotland, invited social workers and researchers to discuss the research and its implications for practice.

Publication 3 [JG3]

Cooper, B., Gordon, J. and Rixon, A. (2015) Best Practice with Children and Families: Critical social work stories, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan: 'Introduction' and 'Telling Stories: A journey into narratives of practice', 1-27.

Role: Joint author

Summary: These chapters introduce the book, address the theoretical basis for critical best practice, and discuss the benefits and challenges of constructing and learning from narratives of practice.

Publication 4 [JG4]:

Cooper, B., Gordon, J. and Rixon, A. (2015) Best Practice with Children and Families: Critical social work stories, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan: 'Conclusion', 186-93.

Role: Lead author (the co-authors acted as critical readers)

Summary: The final chapter of the book summarises key arguments and findings, and identifies opportunities for learning from critical best practice accounts.

Publication 5 [JG5]:

Gordon, J., Rixon, A. and Cooper, B. (2017) 'Social workers writing for publication: The story of a practice and academic partnership', Practice: Social work in Action, 29, 3, 219-235.

Role: Shared lead authorship with Andy Rixon, critical review by Barry Cooper

Summary: This paper also arose from the 'Practitioner Pathways into Publishing' project. It reviews and evaluates our experience of supporting practitioners to write for publication and outlines the benefits and challenges for academic and practitioner authors who co-write for publication. The article identifies a range of practical ways to support practitioners to write about social work practice.

Impact and dissemination: Some of the social workers who acted as co-authors as part of a 'Practitioner Pathways into Publishing Project' that accompanied the writing of the book, have gone on to take up other writing opportunities.

Publication 6 [JG6]:

Gordon, J. and Dunworth, M. (2017) 'The fall and rise of 'use of self'? An exploration of the positioning of use of self in social work education', Social Work Education, 36, 5, 591-603.

Linked to:

Dunworth, M. and Gordon, J. (2014). *Mapping of Standards in Social Work Education to the revised National Occupational Standards in Social Work*, Dundee, SSSC <http://www.sssc.uk.com/about-the-sssc/multimedia-library/publications?task=document.viewdoc&id=1414> [Accessed online 7.2.18]

Role: The research on which this article is based was commissioned and funded by the Scottish Social Services Council. The final report, which was not peer reviewed, was written with Moira Dunworth, who later acted as critical reader to the journal article.

Summary: The article draws on a comparative content analysis of standards for social work education developed in 2003 and 2013. It identifies a shift from a task to a practitioner focus in recent standards and explores drivers and challenges related to one element of this apparent change, an increase in emphasis on use of self.

Impact and dissemination: The desk research on which this paper is based contributed to Scotland's Review of the Social Work Degree (Dunworth and Gordon, 2014).

Publication 7 [JG7]:

Gordon, J. and Mackay, G. (2017) 'The Practice Pyramid: A model for integrating social work values, theory and practice', Journal of Practice Teaching and Learning, 14, 3, 51-64.

Role: Interviewer, analysis and writer, with feedback from co-author and participant, a social work student on a practice placement.

Summary: The research for this paper was done when I was working as a practice educator, supervising a student, Gillian Mackay, in a criminal justice social work team. Data from an interview with the student is used to illustrate how she used a learning tool, the Practice Pyramid, to analyse her practice, and to identify the benefits of this structured way of integrating values, theory and practice.

Impact and dissemination: I co-presented a workshop about the research and use of the Practice Pyramid, alongside another social work student, at the Scottish Organisation for Practice Teaching (ScoPT) annual conference held in Glasgow in November 2016.

Publication 8 [JG8]:

Gordon, J. (2017) 'The Voice of the Social Worker: A narrative literature review', British Journal of Social Work, Published online 25.10.17

<https://academic.oup.com/bjsw/advance-article-abstract/doi/10.1093/bjsw/bcx108/4565514>

Role: Sole author.

Summary: This narrative book review takes as its subject the voice of the social worker in all its forms: written, spoken and enacted. It finds evidence of increasing interest in conveying practitioner experience in a wide range of literature sources, including (auto)biography, (auto)ethnography, and narrative research. The benefits of hearing the practitioner's voice in social

work practice, education and policy are outlined. The potential challenges and contradictions inherent in the concept of 'voice' are also explored. The paper also identifies opportunities for future research, including continuing development of narrative and practice-near⁵ approaches.

⁵ 'Practice-near' is used here in the sense of the use of 'experience-near' methods such as ethnography, some types of in depth qualitative interviewing, and the use of sound, images and other sensory data to get close to practice (Froggett and Briggs, 2012).

Publications

	<i>Page no:</i>
Appendix 2: [JG1]	107
Gordon, J. and Cooper, B. (2010) 'Talking knowledge – Practising knowledge: A critical best practice approach to how social workers understand and use knowledge in practice', <i>Practice: Social work in Action</i> , 22(4), 245-257.	
Appendix 3: [JG5]	121
Gordon, J., Rixon, A. and Cooper, B. (2017) 'Social workers writing for publication: The story of a practice and academic partnership', <i>Practice: Social work in Action</i> , 29, 3, 219-235.	
Appendix 4: [JG6]	139
Gordon, J. and Dunworth, M. (2017) 'The fall and rise of 'use of self'? An exploration of the positioning of use of self in social work education', <i>Social Work Education</i> , 36, 5, 591-603.	
Appendix 5: [JG7]	153
Gordon, J. and Mackay, G. (2017) 'The Practice Pyramid: A model for integrating social work values, theory and practice', <i>Journal of Practice Teaching and Learning</i> , 14, 3, 51-64.	
Appendix 6: [JG8]	171
Gordon, J. (2017) 'The Voice of the Social Worker: A narrative literature review', <i>British Journal of Social Work</i> , Published online 25.10.17 https://academic.oup.com/bjsw/advance-article-abstract/doi/10.1093/bjsw/bcx108/4565514	

Permission has been sought from joint authors for the inclusion of the journal articles in this thesis.

Publications [JG2], [JG3] and [JG4] are contained in book that accompanies this thesis:

Cooper, B., Gordon, J. and Rixon, A. (2015) *Best Practice with Children and Families: Critical social work stories*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan