Researching Social Work Practice, or Practising in Social Work Research? In Search of Our Identities as Social Work Researchers

Anne Hollows, Ph.D., Yvonne Channer, M.Phil., Peter Nelson, M.A.,
Ian Storr, M.A., and Janet E. Williams, M.A.
Sheffield Hallman University Health and Social Care Research Centre in Sheffield, England

The five authors of this narrative are UK-qualified social workers, with many years of experience in practice. They include two white women, one black woman, and two white men. For the last decade, four of the authors have been employed as academic educators and researchers, while the fifth has divided his time between practice and academic work. They all work in an English university with a modest commitment to research, which they balance with their significant teaching commitments. The authors decided to develop a group narrative in which their experiences of researching social work practice were described within the framework of the research process. This narrative focuses on the starting points, methods, ethics, and reporting of research before turning to our reflections of how this has shaped their individual identities as social work researchers.

The Context of Our Work

Social work research in the UK has been slow to develop a distinct profile within the wider academy. The broad, interdisciplinary evidence base for social work practice provides a locus for sociologists, psychologists, social policy specialists, and some branches of health professions to produce influential research alongside that of social work researchers. The major national funding organisation in the UK (the Economic and Social Research Council) has no funding stream for social work research: applications from social work academics have to meet the review criteria of one of the traditional disciplines. Carving out a share of the research cake has been a preoccupation of social work academics in the UK for a number of years, with modest success. In particular, a series of seminars between 1999 and 2001 raised the profile of social work as a research discipline in its own right, as well as identifying the particular contribution it makes to social science research activity.

The increasingly youthful age profile of entrants to social work degrees (which in the UK all incorporate the sole recognised professional qualification) may in time encourage some students to choose a research career as an option after graduating. That will undoubtedly impact upon the approach to research and the identity of researchers. For the present, most social work academics in the UK have a prior history as practitioners. Indeed, qualification and practice experience in social work is an essential prerequisite for appointment to most academic positions.

Among our generation of academics, doctoral studies are usually undertaken alongside our academic roles, if at all. Only one of the authors has completed a doctorate although two more are working towards it. On the other hand, all the members of the group have undertaken training in social research methods, and scholarship, comprising both research and publication, is an expected (if often marginalized) area of our work. Membership of research teams provides an element of apprenticeship in the research task as well as the opportunity to work at a greater scale. All of the group are active researchers engaged in personal research and two of us are also involved in

large team projects with colleagues in other subject areas.

Talking About Being Social Work Researchers

We were all practitioners before we became researchers. While our stories of practice are often shared, we have rarely had (or made) the time to reflect on our stories of being researchers. Deciding to meet to develop our narratives seemed to be significant to all of us. Our first meeting was conducted as a focus group, using the stimulus material of the call for contributions to this journal. Thereafter we agreed to review our emerging stories in an attempt to extend, as well as to analyse, our shared experiences. A series of five meetings took place alongside extensive individual commentary on the emerging document. Mirroring our struggles to make space for research, we could not all attend every meeting but most of us got to most meetings. The meetings, and the process, have become symbolic to all of us: it is the most productive time we have spent together discussing research. Our approach has been reflexive, to the point of developing a "double hermeneutic" (Giddens, 1991) in that we have been able to develop our sense of identify in relation to practice and research by sharing our own stories and responding to feedback within the group. Emerging out of this we have endeavoured to understand how our experience relates to our identity: are we primarily members of the social work profession who do research? Or are we academics who research social work practice?

Our Starting Points in Research

Research has its origins in many activities. Our teaching prepares student social workers for current practice and encourages an informed critique of current practice. As academic staff we must therefore ensure that teaching is well grounded in current practice trends and issues, as well as in current research and scholarship. We have significant opportunities for contact with social work practice through our academic supervision of the 200 days of clinical practice, or internship, that each student must complete. Quite apart from our personal contacts with friends and former colleagues in the profession, we therefore have plenty of links with field practice in both state and non-governmental or charity organisations. This is where we often first confront the issues that eventually form research questions for us to answer. It is ironic, therefore, that when we gain research contracts, we often use the income to release ourselves from practice supervision – the very task that puts us most in line to confront the questions of practice.

For many of our research activities, our engagement with a research question begins before there is any declared research aim. Precisely because we maintain good links with practice, we often find ourselves being approached by practitioners seeking answers to their questions and problems. Local practitioners often see us as part of their extended family of colleagues, with privileged access to knowledge. Sometimes this is because we used to be 'one of them', while at other times it is because we taught them: either way there is a safety in trusting us. Our experience of their environment is slightly different. In true person-as-scientist (Kelly, 1955) mode, our encounters with practice provide opportunities to observe, ask questions, formulate hypotheses, and test our understanding of the world in terms of how it guides future events and behaviours.

In the beginning, then, some of our 'research' could only claim that title in a colloquial sense: we are simply finding things out about the nature or detail of social work practice, relating the experience of one practitioner or team to the evidence base generated by studies elsewhere. Problem solving, meeting needs, getting the evidence

to make a case, a piece of exploratory project work have all been the starting points for an emerging recognition that a more formal process of data collection and analysis is required to solve the puzzle. "It is a sort of mutual shuffling towards an idea," said one member of the group. In some circumstances, we have recognised that data collected for other purposes would benefit from imposing a research perspective in order to provide a framework for analysis.

Between us, we have worked on projects designed to collect new evidence or solve new problems; research stemming from our advocacy of needs, research designed to assess outcomes, and research designed to answer other people's questions. One of the group described how his research began:

"I am the manager of an NGO's visiting advocacy service in the North of England. I was approached by the manager of a local authority secure children's home, where we had a service, to develop a system of exit interviews of young people leaving the unit. His intentions were to use their feedback to develop the service offered by the unit and to demonstrate user-involvement to inspectors. I was keen to respond to the request. The NGO is committed to increasing opportunities for young people to comment on the services they receive and I thought that the proposal would also give the visiting advocates another point of contact with young people at a time, discharge, which is often problematic for them.

"The system involved the visiting advocates for the unit giving questionnaires to the young people shortly before their discharge. These questionnaires invited young people to rate their satisfaction with different aspects of their care and to add any comments they wanted to. The young people would complete these either themselves or in conjunction with the visiting advocates. The advocates would then forward the questionnaires to myself and I would produce and discuss with the unit manager and the advocates, on a six-monthly basis, totals of the young people's ratings and a transcription of their comments. We would try to reach agreements for action in areas of difficulty. Within eighteen months, following discussions with their managers, I had rolled out this system to two other secure units.

"This process was located within the continuum of our advocacy activities and, through cross-referencing, reinforced the effectiveness of the individual advocacy work with young people. I thought it important to write up our experiences to stimulate discussion within my own agency and the national forum for managers of secure children's homes in order to extend the system to other units. I felt also that the quality of information about young people's perceptions of their care needed to be circulated to a wider audience at a time when central government was keener on different models of provision, larger, cheaper, and more focused on training rather than care. Young people's assessment of their care was generally positive and I thought that this was a message that needed to be heard. It was at this point that I started to seriously think of developing the process into a research study."

Although much of our research has an evaluative component, it always has, at its heart, a puzzle that the researcher is keen to solve (Mason, 1996), whether it relates to understanding the situations of service users or understanding and evaluating interventions. As professional 'puzzle solvers' we value a stage in the research process that enables us to refine the nature of the puzzle, often akin to grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). One of the group described recently how at the start of new work (evaluation of a new, inter-professional community project) she spent time 'walking the patch' and getting the feel of the area and the people who lived there with the school social worker. Another story of beginning research shows how these

important early stages of exploration can not only shape the study but also become data:

"My links to practice were focused on an interest developed when I was a practitioner. Together with women colleagues, we had become concerned about women who used the mental health services and in particular women survivors of childhood sexual abuse. Around that time I joined the university and left practice while my colleagues became pro-active, forming a steering group and obtaining funds to set up a small charity. This offered badly needed services for the survivors, but also developed training and support for practitioners. Thus one of my key interests was expanded by this new activity, and for a short while I was active on the management committee, but I found that my role with my friends and colleagues gained a particular character. When we met to discuss progress I would draw back and listen to them so that I could understand what was working or not. I thought this would inform my teaching. I asked questions and probed; they voiced their 'thinking through' and developed explanations.

"This then was the context for a coincidence of needs and interests. They needed research, data, and evidence in a form that could be used to establish, fund, and extend the service, and I was looking to develop a research project in line with university requirements. They had lots of bits of evidence from their work experience as mental health social workers. But the very presence of the charity had highlighted other issues. Practitioners were keen to pass on women to this new service unthinkingly, as if the label 'survivor' meant that social work professionals had nothing to offer and often with no insight as to the relationship for survivors between the experience of abuse and their many other problems. Expectations of this tiny organization were out of proportion.

"The research began using a traditional model; I needed to understand the whole field in a comprehensive and systematic way so I met with the strategy group whom I quizzed. I wrote notes and circulated them for confirmation and clarification at the next meetings. It was collaboration and co-researching; it was really listening and wanting to accurately represent their experience, thoughts and opinions. At the same time the sociological and structural issues about gender began to crystallize and this sometimes prompted my questions. Through them I also identified other key individuals to discuss related issues and to discuss the history of certain policy developments which had been introduced and which were crucial to the gate keeping and allocation of services. In this way I developed a comprehensive picture and mapped out significant issues in a process that was auditable, valid, and reliable. Initially I saw this as preparation for research, but with hindsight I realized that the material was, in fact, field notes and became the significant first of three elements of data collection. A survey of all the practitioners on the basis of the mapping of themes and later focus groups were to follow. In some respects this was a grounded approach since I had attempted not to impose my views, although my subsequent analysis was not strictly grounded, taking a more global approach to incorporate feminist perspectives."

This account and the previous story raise the complexity of insider/outsider issues. The organizations concerned knew the researchers' agendas; they had a shared perspective. This extended to co-researching in some senses, though the researcher maintained leadership of the process while also having access to others outside this group. What to some might appear a messy start to research with unclear boundaries and roles appears to us to be a particular benefit to research on social work practice where methods evolve organically to suit not only

our needs as researchers but the needs of the practitioners and service users concerned. Fundamental to this process is the trust that we can invoke as members of the same profession, former practitioners, and often colleagues. As our stories progress we will examine other aspects of the trust dimension. We turn now to considering our methods.

The Methods We Employ

Social work as an activity has much in common with social research at least within the qualitative domain. Gilgun has argued, for example, that much social work activity resembles grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), particularly in respect of the development of practice knowledge in a case (Gilgun, 1994). Fortune notes the relationship, too, between ethnography and social work practice in developing knowledge about social work settings as well as gaining a better understanding of client populations and their cultures (Fortune, 1994). The very task of assessment, in its earlier form of social diagnosis, draws on the broad concepts of heuristic research (Moustakis, 1990). The study of narratives also has resonance with social work practice, going beyond simply taking a case history and providing the means of understanding and making sense of lived experience (Riessman, 1994). Narratives provide a tool not only for research but also for therapeutic interventions, empowering clients through the creation of a coherent account of their lives, providing congruence with anti-oppressive practice.

Not surprisingly, given the close links between the social work task and methods generally described as qualitative in research, considerable attention has been paid to the development of such methods in research in social work as we seek to describe and explore the social work task from the perspective of both users and workers (Fawcett, Featherstone, Fook, & Rossiter, 2000; Karvinenen, Poso, and Satka, 1999; Riessman, 1994; Sherman & Reid 1994). Qualitative approaches are increasingly used in evaluating social work outcomes, particularly where process, as well as outcome, is a focus (Rees & Wallace, 1982). Although we have used quantitative data where it has been appropriate, most of the research undertaken by group members has an interpretive strategy. Perhaps because we are all involved with teaching about the social work process, it is researching the process issues in practice that particularly excites us. We are also concerned to enable service users' views of practice to be heard. Our enthusiasms are not always shared by practitioners, or indeed by service managers. One member of the group noted:

> "I have found that practitioners, rather like beginning social work students, have an initial tendency to favour methods that employ large sets of data, gathered through impersonal questionnaires. They are convinced that scale equates with validity. It may be that the daily dealing with uncertainty that characterises much of social work practice encourages a craving for absolutes where research is concerned. Recently, as part of a research project, I have been training practitioners to collect parents' stories so that they can identify points and patterns of change. They were initially reluctant, in particular when there were visible differences between the text of these narratives and the case histories recorded by the workers. Gradually they began to see the value of a process that not only collected data for the researcher but also left the participants with their own stories."

Some of us develop our research around practitioners' stories. We have all been

concerned to encourage practitioners to be better able to articulate their practice: research that involves them talking about their work is one way of achieving this. Another member of the group said:

> "When I have interviewed practitioners at any length, I have been only too well aware of their enthusiasm to talk about their work. I undertook a study based on long interviews with 25 practitioners, and they seemed to really enjoy it. Their comments on the process included phrases like 'it was a bit like good supervision' and 'this is the first time I have ever talked about a case from A to Z' and 'I found it almost therapeutic.' Perhaps allowing them to develop their story of a case is a helpful contrast to the incident-focussed nature of their work."

One of the group described a method in which a series of stories, reflecting the experiences of different practitioners, as well as the different members of a family, had been generated around a single case over time:

> "I had been asked to look at the impact of a family-support initiative on recidivism in child-protection cases. The success and consequent funding of projects is often closely tied to the evidenced meeting of targets. In this case the project had a clear target of reducing the number of children who were re-registered on a child protection register" (i.e., the problems had recurred).

An immediate response was to turn to existing government data and compare rates of re-registration before and after the introduction of the family-support programme. It quickly became apparent, however, that simple outturn data alone could tell us little about the efficacy of the family-support programme. For example, a child's name could be de-registered following court intervention where, rather than being an indicator of success, the care of the child had deteriorated such that he or she could no longer remain with the parents. The frequent changes in the threshold for registration employed by the local social work department would also affect the rate of registration.

To meet some of these difficulties in researching and evaluating the work of the family-support initiative in the area of child protection, a case study approach was designed. The study took as its focus a single family living within the project catchment area with a child whose name was on the child-protection register and where child-protection issues were a central concern to the family. The research involved semi-structured and unstructured interviews with family members and carers, as well as with a range of professionals involved in providing services to the family. These interviews were repeated during a twelve-month period to establish engagement and exchange between family and service providers.

Family members in particular were keen to tell their stories, and it was quite difficult at times to remember that the main reason for my talking to the family was for research purposes. The family was struggling with a range of difficulties and from my professional social work persona, I could identify ways others might help them with their problems. Talking to practitioners from different professions engaged with the family elicited reactions from resistance to openness, but when brought together produced a richness and depth of data. These data illuminated the effectiveness of the family-support initiative and other professions in working together to help the family with the range of difficulties which affected their ability to care for their child.

Clearly it was not possible to draw far-reaching conclusions from a single case study. The immediate aim of the research was to provide information and feedback to the service providers involved and potentially involved in work with the family and others facing similar problems in the same area. By allowing different family members and different practitioners to tell their stories, the complexity of the situation and responses became apparent. The importance for research and evaluation to avoid the simplification of complex situations in order to provide simple, as distinct from clear, answers to the questions asked by fund holders was re-enforced."

Fieldwork

Our fieldwork has utilised the canon of social research methods, as well as developing new approaches, particularly in research with children. In addition to gathering data from practitioners and service users directly through questionnaires or interviews of individuals and groups, we also use observation techniques and documentary analysis of administrative files and records. One of our doctoral students studying recruitment and retention in social work practice is currently using personal diary records of the emotional experience of the practice environment. A current project is working with young people to develop 'issue boards' through photographic collage, which will then be used as stimulus material for focus groups of social work professionals, which the young people will lead. We are all conscious of the extent to which we apply all of our communication skills as social workers – and as teachers – in devising our methods of data collection. We aim to combine this with creativity designed to empower our research participants to share their stories with us. But we found, as a group, that we also all faced challenges. Two issues dominated our discussions about fieldwork, however. The first emphasises the extent to which we are still a part of the social work process.

A central focus of our approach to research is that we should "do no harm" to the participants, but in some ways this stops short of answering the key question "should we do good if the opportunity arises?" As social work researchers should we, on occasion, interrupt our data collection and respond to service user need, even if the consequence may be to flaw our research sample?

As social workers (we are all still registered social work practitioners) we have a commitment to social work values and subscribe to the "Ethics of Social Work: Principles and Standards" adopted by the International Federation of Social Workers and manifest in the British Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics for Social Work (*Code of Ethics, 2002*)

*Social work practice should promote respect for **human dignity** and pursue **social justice** through **service to humanity, integrity** and **competence.***

Section 4.4.4 (*Code of Ethics, 2002*) applies the general provision of the code to the ethics of research and, in seeking congruence with social work values, states that social work researchers will:

> *Retain a primary concern for the welfare of research subjects and actively protect them from harm, particularly those who are disadvantaged, vulnerable or oppressed or have exceptional needs.*

The key aspect here is that a commitment to social work values entails a commitment to action.

In practice the issues and the debates and the dilemmas arise over what sort of action to take.

> "Interviewing the carers of a child it gradually became apparent that they were not receiving all the financial benefits to which they were entitled. At the end of the interview I pointed this out to them and indicated where they might go to obtain help in challenging decisions and obtaining more money. I was left feeling uncomfortable, however. I knew research findings indicated that such families, when in the midst of difficulties, lack the motivation to be proactive in seeking help. Should I have asked if they would like me to advocate for them?"

In social work research as in social work practice it is rare for there to be one clear course of action which will meet the complexity of a given situation. What is perhaps clear is that for social work researchers, the service user and their needs ultimately take precedence over the collection of data.

The second issue provides another perspective on our identity in the interview process. 'Sitting on my hands' was the expression one of the group used to describe what sometimes happened when she was interviewing social workers:

> "In one instance, the participant was describing his work in a very complex case involving four siblings who he believed should remain placed together, albeit in a costly private placement. He had justified his reasons successfully through three different arenas and now had to gain the approval of the organisation's final resources panel. He was desperate to find research evidence, which he hoped would support his case. As a researcher, who happened to have an interest in sibling placements, I was aware that sitting on my shelf in my office was a large file full of research papers about siblings. But I was interviewing here, about a more general issue of professional practice, and I was being a researcher, rather than supervising or teaching a student. In that moment I had a huge sense of frustration with my relatively new research role but forced myself to focus on the topic of the interview. Even with the tape recorder switched off, I focussed on closing the interview, mindful of the many times when participants had continued to provide valuable data after the formal end of the interview. After the participant had left, I tore after him offering to bring in the folder the next day."

Analysis

It is precisely because of our familiarity with the terrain that analysis can be the biggest challenge. How much is our analysis tainted with the practice wisdom we warn our students against? Our own experience is one of extreme caution. We are all only too aware of the need to ensure that our research – particularly within the interpretive tradition – is demonstrably rigorous and systematic. We laughed about what one recent seminar in the UK called the 'ah-ha' factor in research: the sudden recognition and knowing that is perhaps better known to researchers as 'epiphany' (Denzin, 1989). Perhaps because we know so much about the dangers of confirmatory bias we can see the danger of making intuitive leaps in our analysis. Is this really the transcendent, mind-blowing insight that Denzin describes, or is it the reflexive expertise that Schon (1983) discusses? Could it simply be another form of the practice wisdom that we advise students not to rely upon? Is our knowing really any help at all?

Because we know, are we reluctant to accept epiphany when it occurs?

In the world of qualitative research "we are in a new age where messy, uncertain, multi-voiced texts, cultural criticism, and new experimental works will become more common, as will more reflexive forms of fieldwork, analysis and inter-textural expression"(Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p.15). Denzin considers that the challenge in analysing and reporting research is how the author and indeed the reader are to be able to make connections between the text and the world that is being written about. Social work research does indeed involve messy, uncertain, and multi-voiced texts, and sometimes the detailed records of our observations and "conversations with a purpose" (Burgess, 1984) provide the thick description that enables us to share our knowing with the reader. Allowing the location of our research to come to life in the text is a real advantage in communicating the complexity of social work and of the work of social workers.

Another element of analysis, which we had not all recognised, was described as the 'something we had missed' factor. Here, our qualitative methods come into their own. The immersion in data required by qualitative analysis enables the researcher to hear the data and review the data in a way that sometimes provides insights rarely available to the busy practitioner:

> "One of the boys in my study replied to the question 'Were you happy with the way your privacy was respected' by circling the 'No' answer, and wrote in the comments section 'staff walk in shower whilst in it.' This comment was not picked up by the advocate at the time (the boy had completed the questionnaire himself) and was not picked up by me until I reviewed the data six months later. When this comment was discussed with the unit manager, he, not unreasonably, said that this should have been brought to him earlier as he was not able to follow it up as he would have wanted to, since he did not know either the boy's or the member of staff's name."

In another study, connections were made between one worker and the experiences of various parents whose children had been removed that seemed to be close to victimisation. Again, time had elapsed since the events and the worker was no longer in the area. But these instances remind us that data analysis is different from the sort of analysis that takes place in social work assessment. The rigour we impose on our analysis can sometimes reveal patterns that social workers are not able to see.

Reporting the Research

Much of the research we have undertaken has been framed within an action research perspective – indeed, we share the view that where project evaluation is concerned we have an ethical duty to inform the on-going work of a project. As researchers we have all from time to time observed practice that has fallen short of what we would expect. Because we are often committed in a personal way to the subject matter of our research, we can find the hostility that sometimes greets our findings to be even more painful.

When you tell people (in this case social workers) that they are not wonderful, it is important to be able to point to some strengths. We have to employ all our skills to achieve this: shooting the messenger can be sweet revenge on those deemed to have escaped the daily grind of difficult, unrespectable work. Here we see the other side of the 'trust' coin. We were often doing the research because we were trusted. Our research is welcomed as objective and knowledge based. But they feel that we have

let them down by finding fault. Does this mean that social work researchers who come, like us, from practice have to demonstrate a greater care in their reporting of findings than those who do not share a personal commitment to role and task? If so, the corollary is that our duty to the profession is never to bury the bad news. We believe that researchers should always exercise caution in the way that reporting is handled. It is not simply about reporting findings but also about managing bad news and facilitating change.

Beyond the act of reporting there is the task of wider dissemination. There are complex dilemmas to negotiate here if social work values are to remain intact. The danger of identification of participants can be critical. But so too may be the temptation to include references to detail which, while providing the 'thick description' required of qualitative data and raising important issues, may run the risk of caricaturing the profession or service users and possibly even identifying individuals. We have also to be mindful of the ways in which confidentiality can be difficult to maintain. One of the group described an occasion when a reference by a social worker to being in the same team as the worker handling a particularly infamous child-care case had to be omitted: even though it proved precisely her point about the long-standing impact of these events on practice, it would have negated all her efforts to keep the location of the research confidential.

We are not the first researchers to wrestle with the issue of disseminating reported speech. Because we mainly research in an area with a strong local dialect, we are not always able to include verbatim quotes from participants. While it would not be ethical to quote in exact speech, it would not be credible to report in conventional academic language. Writing for academic journals creates yet another layer of difficulty. One social worker who had participated in one of my studies said she would never have recognised herself from the academic write up, alongside all the references and so on. But here, more than anywhere else, we are building the new knowledge that may contribute to the future of our profession. Some of us now make it a point of principle to share interview transcripts with participants wherever possible, extending the participatory approach. It is an area where we need to continually strive to maintain our professional values in our research practice.

Our Identities

So who are we? Are we social workers practising as researchers, or researchers who have been social workers? In the final stage of our group's story, we consider the impact of all of our experiences on ourselves.

An unexpected finding of our discussions was the common theme of how our research is perceived by others, including our academic colleagues in a faculty dominated by health professionals. This is particularly an issue when working in the area of sexual abuse. People, even colleagues and close contacts, will say of my work, "Is it to get at men?" While teaching at a partner university in Europe, I had visited a trauma and abuse centre, leading to the comment "So you had lunch with that lot, did you," even from social work academics. I began to think that social work academics were no different from people in general who were not very well thought out on sex and gender issues, wanting to project their own voyeuristic perspectives onto the researchers'. The subject matter of research in social work practice is often on the margins of the experience of a largely white, middle-class faculty. The work that social workers do, and the people with whom they do it, are sometimes seen as less respectable and in some ways more culpable than those who are simply in poor health.

This question of identity can be a greater challenge in the increasingly multi-professional environment of practice in the UK. One group

member noted that when our social work students are learning in inter-professional groups, they have commented "They don't think much of social workers do they, these health professionals?" So the social work researcher, researching in an inter-professional environment (the experience of all the group members), experiences problems of identity and status. "Differences in contracts of employment, the different types and standards of professional training, occupational status and prestige, gender, race, class, language and public image all contribute to the real and felt power differentials within the inter-agency network" (Calder, 2003, p.10).

In our academic context, being social work researchers is ironically quite a challenge. Even carving out the space for research is a struggle within the increasingly commercial world of university education. Paradoxically that may be one answer to the question. Perhaps it is precisely because of the commodification of knowledge, of teaching as product rather than process, that we are seeking the opportunity to be knowledge generators as we continue the long line of social work academics who have developed the discipline. As such we can be stronger by forming a real "community of knowers" (Toulmin, 1972, p.139) as we transmit the tenets of social work practice, revised by our own research, to the students who will be the practitioners of the future. At the same time, it has to be said that we all recognise that research itself can be, and often is, commodified. We would be foolish not to own the status and privilege that comes from being members of our faculty's active research group.

Another explanation for our continuing commitment is that it represents – and develops – our own expertise. We have already noted the extent to which we are viewed by practitioners as having an area of expertise, generally related to what we are known to teach and to write about, and the commitment we share to maintaining our knowledge in order to be effective teachers. One of us spends more than half of his time *in* practice and has his own territory or expertise in that field. For the rest of us, lacking a practice base to give us expertise, we have turned to research as a way of connecting with the world of practice. Students value the integration of stories from practice in our teaching and for us, research data generates the vignettes that enable theory to be identified with, and grounded in, practice. We hone our thinking about professional practice through our research and in a Bayesian sense we are even known to have changed our minds as the data have provoked a re-think of previous perspectives.

The third explanation is much more rooted in our histories as radical social workers. Where the starting point for research is our personal interest in solving the puzzle, we own what is often an intense commitment to the work. Researchers may take on the role of exploiter, advocate, reformer, or friend (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992), resulting in important implications for researchers with passion. It contrasts acutely with the 'contract' and 'jobbing' research of commissioned work and of some teamwork. We have all experienced research where the question, and even the method, was determined before we were 'hired' to do the work. While none of us have undertaken work we felt to be pointless, the personal work feels very different from the situation where, as one member said, "I went in, I collected the data, wrote the report and I left." Taking this distinction further, the group drew out the view that such contract research required a more businesslike approach. The research processes were more realistic and less idealistic. Deadlines had to be met and there is a need to be pragmatic earlier on in the process. Without suggesting that this was necessarily a bad thing, it was clearly a very different experience from working on our

more personal projects, elaborated by one member as "this is my commitment, this is me." For one of us this was research about the experiences of adult survivors of abuse, for another it was about sexual harassment and domestic abuse, and for a third it was about factors promoting success in the lives of black children. We speculated as to whether this was an extension of the personal and political commitments of the three quoted members – all women. The men in our group raised their own personal commitments with equal vigour. We concluded that this was neither a business/hobby divide nor a gender divide, but something more profound, encompassing personal, political, and professional values. We belong to a generation of social workers for whom the commitment to radical action is inextricably linked with our careers, and our research experience is simply a re-working of that commitment: to work to improve the services available for marginalized individuals, families, groups, and communities. Whether as practitioners or researchers, our goal is to empower disenfranchised people

Finally we turn to our group. We have all experienced it as supportive and non-competitive. We formed and normed, without any painful sense of the storming that groups experience. One member said, "It is not always what academics are about: the collective noun 'a malice of academics' has been suggested to me before now." We have been aware of making a tangible effort to produce this article, itself a welcome focus. Perhaps the most rewarding aspect has been valuing ourselves as the focus of our talk. It has been helpful to share what we have been doing, how we got into it, our feelings about it, and our hopes for it. Unlike some of our writings, it does not seem ostentatiously theoretical. Our goal is reached and this group is over. As we move on as individual researchers, we know that we can develop and improve through sharing our stories of research as we go.

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Anne Hollows, Ph.D., is a Principal Lecturer and Research Coordinator for Social Work at the Sheffield Hallman University, Health and Social Care Research Centre in Sheffield, England. Yvonne Channer, M. Phil., Peter Nelson, M.A., Ian Storr, M.A., and Janet E. Williams, M.A., are all lecturers and colleagues at the same institution. Comments regarding this article can be sent to a.e.hollows@shu.ac.uk.

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