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Social workers writing for publication: The story of a practice and academic partnership

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Jean Gordon is a researcher, educator and writer in mental health, law and social work education. She has worked as a social worker, practice teacher and mental health officer in a range of hospital, community mental health and supported employment settings in Scotland. Recent publications have included '*Social Work and the Law in Scotland*' and '*Best Practice with Children and Families: Critical Social Work Stories*'. She has also been involved in developing an Open Learn online course about personalisation and self-directed support in Scotland. See also: <http://jeangordon.co.uk/>

Andy Rixon has worked as a social worker with children and families and in staff training and development with a particular focus on post-qualifying education for social workers. He has been at the Open University since 2006 contributing chapters to several books including *Critical practice with children and young people* (2010) and co-edited *Changing Children's services: working and learning together* (2014) and '*Best Practice with Children and Families: Critical Social Work Stories*' (2015)

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Social workers writing for publication: The story of a practice and academic partnership

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Social workers writing for publication: The story of a practice and academic partnership

Abstract

This paper outlines the processes, outcomes and lessons learnt from a collaborative writing project undertaken as a partnership between academics at the Open University and eleven social work practitioners from a variety of social work settings across the UK. This partnership successfully co-produced a book of social work stories using a critical best practice approach (Cooper, Gordon and Rixon, 2015a), which describes and analyses the realities of everyday social work practice. In a context where there still appear to be many barriers to the involvement of practising social workers in research and writing, we conclude that the project's collaborative process facilitated the sharing of practitioner experience and expertise with the wider world. Drawing on lessons learned during the writing of the book, a number of practical ways of building on this initiative to support the development of practitioner writing are proposed.

Key Words: Practitioner Writing, Publication, Critical Best Practice, Partnership

Introduction

In many ways, social workers would seem ideally placed to write about and disseminate their practice knowledge, experiences and findings. They work at the 'coal face' of practice in day to day involvement with the lives of service users and carers and so have a considerable contribution to make to knowledge production and exchange (Rasmussen, 2011; MacRae, Smith and Cree, 2016), both within their own profession and in the wider context of health and social care. Social work writing for publication has not been extensively researched, but the literature has consistently found that it is relatively unusual for social workers to write about their practice in ways that reach wider audiences (Staudt, Dulmus and Bennett, 2003; Boddy, Daly and Munch, 2012). This paper describes one way of addressing the dearth of published practitioner writing, by means of a collaborative project between academic researchers and practitioners in children and family social work services in the UK. We start with a review of the current state of knowledge about practitioner writing before going on to describe the nature of the project and its outcomes. Finally, we reflect on the success of the initiative and share our learning from the book-writing project.

Researching and writing

Writing is an integral part of social work education and practice. A level of competence in writing is required for entry to social work qualifying programmes, and both 'academic' and more reflective, practice-based writing are assessed on UK social work programmes. Much of social work practice takes place through the medium of writing, and recording is an essential skill for any practitioner in any setting (Rai, 2011; Rai and Lillis, 2013). Published, peer-reviewed writing about social work is, however, primarily authored by university-based educators, who are increasingly expected to be research active and to publish their research findings in peer-reviewed publications (Hanna and Nash, 2011). A minority of social workers also write for a wider audience, traditionally through writing for publication in journals and other scholarly publications and it is this aspect of writing that this paper will focus on while recognising that there are an increasing number of more informal media through which the social work voice may be heard.

There are some interesting differences between approaches to practitioner writing in social work and in some other comparable academic, work-based disciplines. For example, there has been a growing expectation that a range of health care professionals will, as part of their continuous professional development, use their writing skills to disseminate research findings and information to build the profession's knowledge base and improve patient care (Heron and Murray, 2004; Hislop, Murray and Newton, 2008; Driscoll and Aquilina, 2011). Although there are certainly social workers who research, and some who write, these activities are the exception rather than the rule. Social work practitioner writing is not embedded in the cultures of social care workplaces and is rarely expected to inform professional development.

Since the act of writing is a key element of the research process, it is not possible to discuss published writing in social work without considering the contested position of research in social work education and practice. An audit of research teaching in UK qualifying social work education (MacIntyre and Paul, 2011, 685), found 'fundamental reservations and resistance' on the part of educators, students and practitioners about the place of research in social work. Whilst the profession continues to be urged to improve the evidence base that informs social work practice, Orme and Powell (2008) identified a 'circle of resistance' to developing research capacity whereby insufficient research teaching on qualifying programmes had contributed to sidelining of research skills, including writing, in social work organisations. Considerable investment has been made into breaking this 'cycle', in both academic and practice settings in the UK. Policy developments, such as the introduction of degree level social work qualifications and the enhancement of post-qualifying education frameworks and qualifications have sought to enhance the capabilities of social workers to value, use and undertake research.

Practitioner research programmes offer one means of contributing to research activity in the workplace, and provide opportunities for social workers to disseminate their findings in a variety of ways. They are usually developed locally, and often involve collaboration between practice and academic partners (Mitchell, Shaw and Lunt, 2008). Initiatives tend to be short-life projects with limited funding, restricting their potential to achieve more lasting change in the relationship between practice

and research (Webber and Salter, 2011). Despite these disincentives and constraints, social workers can and do research, and sometimes write, for wider audiences about their research. An initial search by Mitchell, Shaw and Lunt (2008) found over 2000 examples of published English language research or evaluation work written by or involving practitioners between 1998 and 2007. Shaw (2005) suggested that, far from there being a lack of practice-based researchers, there may be more practitioner than academic researchers in the UK. However, most, he suggested, were undertaking local, small scale work that did not find its way into peer-reviewed journals. There may be many reasons for non-publication, including issues about the quality of the research undertaken (Webber and Salter, 2011), or disputes about the legitimacy of writing about practice-based research (Hardwick and Worsley, 2011). However, it appears to be the case that much practitioner research, including research conducted for degree and post-qualifying programmes of learning, never sees the light of day through publication. There are of course many other forms of writing that practitioners may engage in and usefully disseminate to a wider audience, from reflective accounts of practice to literature reviews and opinion pieces. Their writing may also, importantly, find other outlets through, for example, online social media, such as blogging and Twitter. However the practitioner voice remains a mostly quiet one in the world of academic publishing.

So why don't social workers write for publication?

When practitioners have been asked what stops them writing for publication, recurring themes are of lack of time and practical resources, such as access to online libraries (e.g. , Hislop, Murray and Newton, 2008; Boddy, Daly and Munch, 2012). Some employers are perceived as seeing limited value in practitioner research, and social workers derive little benefit in financial or career terms (Croisdale-Appleby, 2014). Heron and Murray (2004) suggest that, unless reading and using research is considered to be relevant in a workplace culture, writing is unlikely to be seen as a worthwhile activity. In busy workplaces writing can be seen as a luxury, one which may be imbued with feelings of guilt at taking 'time off' to write (Hislop, Murray and Newton, 2008). Other reported barriers, identified from a writing project in Australia, include lack of access to mentorship and training in writing skills (Boddy, Daly and Munch, 2012). Unfamiliarity with academic writing and publishing

conventions have also been identified as challenges by practitioners who have seen their research through to publication (Staudt, Dulmus and Bennett., 2003).

There are also 'personal roadblocks' (Bender and Windsor, 2010) which all aspiring practitioner writers must negotiate. Doel (2002, 60) has identified the 'leap of confidence' required for practitioners to expose themselves to a wider, and potentially critical, audience. Heron and Murray (2004, 199) argue that, while some practitioners see writing for publication as part of their professional role, 'the vast majority' do not consider it 'appropriate, relevant or useful to publish in scholarly journals'. The need to develop the confidence to write, and to construct a 'writing identity' (Ibid, 203) emerges as a significant theme in the literature. Positioned within busy workplaces without well-established research and learning cultures, it is perhaps unsurprising that many practitioners report a sense of isolation, and have to be extremely determined to remain motivated and engaged in the writing process (Hislop, Murray and Newton, 2008). This, Heron and Murray (2004) argue, is a particular challenge for social workers in practice settings that are seen as far removed from scholarly writing, such as residential child care staff. As a consequence some social workers are particularly at risk of missing out on this opportunity for personal and practice development, as well as influence over policy and practice in the field.

What helps social workers to publish their writing?

The current state of practitioner research and writing is not, however, all doom and gloom. A great potential strength of practitioner writing is its ability to convey the practice of social work in an authentic and powerful way. Practitioner research has been identified as having an important role to play in the development of a more autonomous learning culture for the profession (Scottish Executive, 2006; Munro, 2011; MacRae, Smith and Cree, 2016). Practitioner research initiatives have demonstrated that all kinds of research activity can help to build learning organisations in which a spirit of inquiry and an interest in disseminating knowledge are actively encouraged (Gardner and Nunan, 2007). A wider role for social workers in knowledge generation and dissemination can only 'strengthen social workers'

professional identity and the standing of the profession more widely' and improve outcomes for service users (Boddy, Daly and Munch, 2012, 247).

There is a considerable literature, some of it specifically addressed at practitioners, which aims to support the development of writing skills, and understanding of the publication process (e.g. Marsh, 2005; Malekoff, 2006; Bender and Windsor, 2010). In addition, some academic journals explicitly set out to encourage contributions from practitioners, 'Practice' journal itself being a good example. There have been a number of initiatives in the UK, and internationally, which have specifically addressed practitioner writing skills and capabilities. These have included the establishment of writing groups, skills workshops and mentoring programmes (e.g. Heron and Murray; 2004, Hislop, Murray and Newton, 2008; Webber and Salter, 2011). Like most practitioner research initiatives, these approaches have involved partnership working between workplace organisations and universities. The importance of fostering collaborative relationships between practitioners and academics in enabling learning and achieving positive outcomes has been stressed (MacRae, Smith and Cree, 2016). Any collaboration has to be mindful of 'unequal power relations' between university-based and practitioner writers, and challenge assumptions about expertise or knowledge that may 'mute or silence' less powerful voices (Fisher, 2004, 29). Audits of published practitioner research suggest that effective collaborations may be a significant contributing factor in successful dissemination and publication (Berg-Weger et al., 2005; Fisher, Fabricant and Simmons, 2005; Mitchell, Shaw and Lunt, 2008). There is also small, but important contribution made to the literature by published books involving collaborations between academic and practice-based writers (e.g. Jones, Cooper and Ferguson, 2008; Jones and Watson, 2013; Cree, 2013). The project under discussion in this article is an example of a similar type of book-writing collaboration, in this instance, between social workers and university-based authors in the UK. The book, and its 'critical best practice' approach to social work with children and families, is described below.

The Book: Critical Best Practice with children and families

The book at the centre of this project aimed to engage readers with ten stories of 'real life' social work practice. Each practice narrative was co-written by a practitioner (or practitioners) and a university-based author. The chapters were grouped around three broad themes central to all social work practice; 'relationships', 'risk, uncertainty and judgement', and 'power, negotiation and problem solving'. The book was underpinned by the critical best practice perspective on social work (Ferguson 2003; Jones, Cooper and Ferguson 2008; Gordon and Cooper, 2010), which,

'...argues that the values and strengths of social work practice emerge through an examination of the detailed complexities of 'what actually goes on' in interactions between people' (Cooper, Gordon and Rixon, 2015a, 5).

The value of having stories and case studies of real practice as a source of learning has been acknowledged in past reviews of the social work profession across the UK (Association of Directors of Social Services, 2005; Scottish Executive, 2006; Social Work Task Force, 2009). This critical best practice approach of promoting learning from good examples of practice acts as a constructive counter to the more frequent tendency of dissecting case examples where things appear to have 'gone wrong'. Practitioner narratives can in this way potentially make a contribution to creating a more positive social work identity both within and beyond the profession. The book takes its place alongside a growing body of literature that uses a narrative approach to explore and learn from the experiences of social workers of everyday practice (for example, Cree, 2003; Huxley et al., 2005; Cree and Davis, 2007; Cree, 2013; Jones and Watson, 2013).

Each narrative in the book places theories, models and research alongside the practitioner's understanding of the service user's experience and their own knowledge derived from practice. The blending of these elements is unique to every encounter. Taking a critical best practice approach means recognising both complexity and uncertainty in day to day social work (Howe, 2009). Crucially 'best' practice here does not equate to 'ideal' practice - which, in any case, will always be contested - but rather is a pragmatic view of 'the best that was achieved at that time, in that situation and by that combination of people, processes and circumstances' (Ferguson, 2008, 4). The critical best practice perspective particularly lends itself to

enabling social workers to write about, and share the detail of everyday practice. The aim is to stimulate learning for a wider audience through critical and reflective accounts of what it is that social workers actually do. While accounts of practice will not provide a blueprint for skills - such as *exactly* how to engage a reluctant family - the opportunity to read how others have been able to engage, what they did, and how and why they did it, can, it is argued, provide new insights and valuable material for discussion and debate.

The book-writing project was initiated by the authors, who had been commissioned by the publishers to write a book about critical best practice with children and families. We go on to explain how we involved and worked with practitioners to write the book together.

The Co-writing Project: 'Practitioners Pathways into Publishing'

The project was a collaborative writing process between two academics from The Open University, an independent researcher and 11 social workers. The key aim was to write about practice: specifically, detailed accounts by practitioners of their own work, supported by reflective commentary and analysis to create a book of 'critical social work stories'. The project was also seen as an opportunity to address some of the barriers to writing and publication identified in the literature by supporting a small number of social workers to become published authors. The research project, funded by the Open University, Faculty of Health & Social Care, was entitled *Practitioner Pathways into Publishing*. Expressions of interest from practitioners were sought via an initial flyer circulated through the University's social work networks across the UK. Its title emphasised that this was an opportunity to get published - contributing to a book that would showcase examples of best practice in children and family social work.

Social workers were recruited from the statutory, independent and private sectors. Consent forms were signed by social worker and agency agreeing the process and how information about children, families and locations were to be anonymised. The practitioners wrote about work with children of different ages and needs as well as

with parents and foster carers. Although frontline practitioners were the original target group for the project, two managers also became involved in discussing and analysing their practice. One chapter was written by two social workers, and also included contributions from a social work manager and foster carer. The project also achieved its aim of working with social workers in Scotland, Wales and England, enabling some exploration of the impact of diverging devolved policy contexts on social work practice.

From the outset the project promoted a collaborative approach to the production of the final text. Each social worker worked with one academic throughout the writing process from initial exploratory discussion about choice of practice example to the final draft of the co-written chapter. The entire process, from idea to publication took nearly three years. All but two of the original practitioner authors stayed with the project during this long gestation period; of those that did not, one left her job during the project, and another was unable to continue due to ill health.

Each practitioner was recorded talking about one example of their work; an example which they felt was illustrative of their overall practice but also represented their 'best practice' in the terms discussed above. The interview was largely unstructured but was prompted by questions from the academic partner. The transcript of this interview was the core material, and data for discussion and analysis, for each chapter, forefronting the practitioner voice. Selecting sections from the interview and generating commentary around them was conducted via a process of sending drafts back and forth between writers supplemented by subsequent phone calls and e-mails.

The academic partners did not set out to act as 'mentors' but as 'catalysts' in initiating the process and 'motivators' to keep the writing process going. Our experience of co-writing echoed some of the findings on common barriers and constraints noted above. While agency permission to be involved in an interview and subsequent co-writing was granted, this did not usually translate into time or active workplace support. Some practitioners struggled with the time commitment for reading drafts of their chapters and adding new material or comments. There were often long gaps in the exchange of drafts when the pressures of work took priority.

Competing university priorities also had an impact on the speed of the process. Changes in management in two practice agencies led to a questioning of the validity of practitioner involvement in the project. In one case this threatened to derail the process at a late stage, but agency approval was eventually granted. Complex ethical issues over anonymisation arose particularly in rural areas, when children and their families were particularly likely to still be identifiable. Despite the intention of enabling social workers to get their name in print, two eventually published under a pseudonym to ensure the confidentiality of the children and families they were writing about.

Partly in anticipation of these barriers it was acknowledged that it might be challenging for all practitioners to guarantee fully co-writing a book chapter in terms of an exact split of time and effort. It was made clear from the outset that there was some flexibility in terms of the extent of their involvement. Feedback from some of the social workers on the writing process acknowledged the feeling that, as one put it, their partner academic had done some of the '*heavy lifting*' at the re-drafting stage. In a project like this with a long timescale it may be that this pragmatic approach is necessary. This pragmatism needed to be underpinned by the development of good personal relationships between authors to work through some of the difficulties and frustrations of co-writing. Nevertheless, while each chapter is a product of a different working relationship and level of involvement, all were 'jointly' produced within the parameters of the project, all contributors having copyright, and each practitioner the first named author.

The experience of writing together

The practitioners' views

Our evaluation of practitioner views is based on the ongoing discussions between the authors and analysis of a feedback form that the practitioners completed after the project to capture some of their reflections and views on future writing.

All the social workers who joined the project readily identified with the value of sharing learning from positive practice; at the very least some *hoped their*

experience may be of use to other practitioners, while others felt very strongly that they had important learning to share. For example, one worker saw his writing as an opportunity to spread learning gained from new experiences at a national level. The underpinning critical best practice approach also proved to be one that readily chimed with the views of the social workers who joined the project:

For me the idea of providing examples of critical practice in the “real social work” world was appealing. Often students feel that the gap between the ideal proposed in theory/academia and the reality of doing the job is insurmountable but it isn’t – I feel this supported my idea of “OK, you can’t get to the top of the mountain but the view from half way up is pretty damn good!”

Throughout my social work training and in my early days as a social worker I was frustrated by the dearth of literature which actually explained how I should engage, often with the most reluctant families

The feedback from practitioners included many comments on how the process of in depth reflection on this single example of their work had affected their thinking about their own practice as a whole:

It has given me a unique opportunity to critically evaluate my own practice and reinforced my confidence....

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 which I felt I had got right and those I had got wrong.

Five practitioners expressed an interest in going on to further writing for publication:

I would welcome any further opportunity to write for publication. This process has provided me with extra interest outside of work. I love social work as a profession, and enjoy talking and writing about my cases. I hope this project will lead to further opportunities.

In one instance growth in confidence led to practitioner involvement in subsequent training, development, and production of written national practice guidance related to the focus of their chapter.

Despite the widely shared view that reflecting on and writing about practice is important there was little indication that this was considered central to the social work role within practitioners' workplaces. For example, one practitioner described her involvement in writing as:

Hugely indulgent! It is good to have the experience of unpicking what you have done and seeing how it makes a difference – sometimes on the “hamster wheel” of social work we don’t get the chance to do this.

This underlines research findings about the problems of, not only securing time for practitioner writing, but also a sense of guilt about writing. This was sometimes seen as a luxury, an indulgence that was not part of the ‘real work’ of everyday social work. There was also some recognition that co-writing had been a genuine learning experience for both the practitioner and university-based writer:

A good learning experience for both, hopefully! A good blend of practice knowledge balanced with academic acumen.

The project also provided an opportunity for practitioners to learn about, and, to some extent, de-mystify, the publication process. While the university partners took on the role of liaison with the publishers, the social workers were kept informed of each stage providing some insight into the process and challenges of publication. One social worker commented that they had not been *aware of how complex the process from interview to publication was.*

The 'academic' authors' views

There were significant benefits too for the academics. At the end of the project we recorded brief individual reflections on the writing process and these are summarised below.

Talking with practitioners about their experiences of practice generated *a wealth of practice learning insights and ideas*, as well as of a renewed close up appreciation of challenges social workers have to negotiate in day to day social work practice. There was also learning from working with practitioners in three of the UK nations and broadening our understanding of the impact of differences in policy, legislation and practice in different locations. Working so closely with practitioners to understand the affordances and constraints of current social work practice was perceived as having a positive impact on our ability to be effective in our roles as social work educators.

Another aspect of author learning was about the process of co-writing, *how to develop longer term writing relationships, with practitioners - and the negotiation and power-sharing that was needed to make these effective*. We had to be particularly aware of, and find ways to mitigate, the potential impact of our status as academics, and the assumptions that we, and practitioners, might be tempted to make about university staff 'knowing best' how to produce a written chapter. It would be wrong, though, to characterise our working relationships as an entirely straightforward academic/ practice split. Writer identities were complex, some changing during the project; for example, several 'practitioners' had teaching roles, and some 'academic' authors worked in practice settings. There is however no doubt that role and status, as well as race and gender, will have had some impact on this project, including perhaps in encouraging - and deterring - practitioners to feel sufficiently motivated and confident to sign up for the writing project in the first place.

Trying to keep the process on track without losing its collaborative intent, required a patient, respectful approach, taking account of the busy working lives of the practitioners, for whom research and writing was not 'the day job'. There could also be tensions about different interpretations of 'best practice' given that all academic authors had also had social work experience:

I found it very hard to keep my own views out of it! There were elements of practice I was doubtful about (just as there were others I was very impressed with) so it was a challenge to the idea of best practice and how we portray it in print. That has implications for shaping the story - what do you put in and leave out?

The process of encapsulating a complex practice experience into a single, coherent chapter was, we found, one of the greatest challenges of the book project. One author recalled, for example, the *great excitement* with which the project began as the initial interviews started and writing collaborations developed. The stories that we heard were fascinating but he also felt that something was lost in the inevitable paring down to produce a readable and accessible end product:

...it wasn't possible to replicate all of this richness and convey the nuances of verbal interactions through the iterative drafting processes needed to produce the final written form.

So the satisfaction for each writing collaboration of seeing their chapter reach fruition was sometimes tempered with a sense of something being lost in translation. The complexities around the multi-layered nature of written narratives are acknowledged and discussed in the final publication where some key questions generated by the writing process are explored: 'What story was the chapter telling?' - and more pertinently here – 'Whose story was this?' (Cooper, Gordon and Rixon 2015b).

Learning and key messages

The aim of the *Practitioner Pathways into Publishing* project was to enable social workers in practice settings to share their day to day experience of social work through the written word. This aim was fulfilled through a process that, to varying extents, demonstrated the value of a collaborative approach to writing, integrating and sharing the complementary skills and knowledge of practitioners and academics. Evaluations of a range of other types of initiatives to promote practitioner research and writing have come to similar conclusions about the value of academic/ practice

partnerships (see e.g. Boddy , Daly and Munch., 2012; Joubert, Epstein and Epstein, 2013; Smith, Wilkinson and Gallagher,2013).

Doel (2002, 61) has suggested that this kind of alliance of practice and academy is potentially an extremely powerful one, bringing together 'people with something to say with people with experience of conveying ideas in writing'. Whilst an academic presence is of course by no means a requirement for practitioner writing, in this project it had a number of important functions, providing the initial catalyst and a bridge between the world of practice and, for the uninitiated, the mystifying and sometimes arcane world of publication. As our chapter writing partnerships developed in different ways, there was learning for both authors about bringing practice and theory together in a meaningful and accessible way. The stereotypical academic/ practice divide tended to blur, as practitioners shared theory and research specific to their work setting, and university-based authors brought their own understandings and experiences on social work practice to bear in the interviews, discussions and subsequent editing. Although we have not conducted any systematic evaluation of longer term outcomes of the project, the limited evidence we have suggests that the experience of co-writing was a positive one that encouraged some to engage in and plan further writing activities. The university-based authors also identified positive outcomes on their role as educators and researchers. We have distilled this learning into a number of key messages that may be helpful to anyone contemplating collaborative writing about social work practice:

1. Effective writing partnerships require **a flexible approach**, tailored to the availability and capacity of individual practitioners. This is particularly so when the partners are subject conflicting pressures on their time, so that sometimes, for example, institutional pressures on academics to publish in short time scales may have to take a back seat to the reality of the pressures of frontline social work practice. That none of the practitioner authors were directly involved in writing this subsequent paper beyond contributing their feedback highlights some of the time and resource constraints on authorship identified earlier in this article.

2. Evidence from this project suggests that the much quoted theory / practice divide may not be a helpful starting point when contemplating practice / academic

partnerships. Our experience was that the writing process was better characterised as a **'reciprocal learning'** process (Joubert, Epstein and Epstein, 2013,107). In any writing partnership, work may be required to free up 'practice' and 'academic' partners to feel confident about bringing their own particular theoretical *and* practice-based knowledge to the writing partnership.

3. A **critical best practice approach** lends itself very well to a collaborative writing project. Its critical underpinnings, and implicit valuing of practitioner expertise and reflection, provide a good 'fit' with the aim of enabling social work practitioners and managers to have a voice.

4. Questions about **confidentiality and anonymity** require careful negotiation at an early stage in the writing process, and need to be kept under continuous review. Agreements must reflect the particular context of practice, so that, for example, accounts of practice in rural areas, where individuals, families and practitioners may be readily identifiable, may require a different level of anonymisation than a practice account set in an urban setting.

5. Decisions about **authorship and copyright** require early resolution with co-authors and publishers, ensuring that practitioner authors are properly credited for their writing. Fisher et al. (2004) have stressed the need for mindfulness about the complex power relations between academic and community settings, and the tendency for the academy to silence less powerful voices. The nature of this particular critical best practice writing genre, which explicitly privileges the voice of the practitioner, probably helped to counteract some of these potentially difficult power dynamics. For both parties in this project, relationships were necessarily subject to continuing negotiation.

6. A degree of **formal involvement by employers** is required to ensure that the implications of employee involvement, including the potential publishing of practice-related writing about the work of their agency are understood. Beyond this, support from line managers, though not always available in any substantial sense, was important to practitioners. During the life of this project social workers changed jobs, line managers were replaced and organisations re-organised. Any long life writing

project needs to be prepared for these kinds of eventualities, and to re-negotiate permissions and support arrangements.

7. Following on from this point, it may be that **the sustainability of practitioner writing** (and contribution to a learning culture) may best be maximised by writing projects being more firmly embedded in the culture of the social worker's employing agency than was generally the case in this project. Our approach relied heavily on the motivation and commitment of individual social workers, and the reported longer term outcomes, such as continued practitioner writing were also individual rather than organisational ones. On the other hand, a direct approach to individuals had certain advantages. By tapping into and running with the social workers' enthusiasm for writing, we were able to move very quickly from planning this project to embarking on interviewing and writing. In this way we bypassed some potentially complex organisational hurdles and rapidly began developing mostly lasting collaborative relationships between writers. This approach also allowed a breadth of coverage, involving social workers and employers from the south of England to Scotland and many different practice settings.

Conclusion

The model of academic/ practice collaboration used to write *'Best Practice with Children and Families: Critical social work stories'* demonstrably achieved its main aim, to enable practitioners to talk, write about and publish their stories of practice. The process of writing together brought about mutual learning for practitioners and academic writers, and there are indications of positive longer term outcomes in relation to encouraging the involved practitioners to continue writing about practice. The project also raised other interesting questions that may benefit from further exploration; two are briefly highlighted here. The first is about the nature of knowledge produced by practitioners using a critical best practice approach. It has been argued that the contribution of practitioners to peer reviewed scholarship is a vital one, both for the quality and relevance of published writing, and to the identity and development of the social work profession (Marsh, 2005). Rasmussen (2011, 31) suggests that this practice-generated knowledge can be regarded as 'a challenge to the dominant institutionalisation' of hierarchical, theory-led knowledge

production by university academics. There are, however, questions to explore about its relationship to more theory-led approaches, and the extent to which practitioner writing offers productive learning opportunities for social workers and their organisations. This leads to a second question, about the legitimacy of different forms of writing. The practitioners in this project joined an essentially university-led writing project, which secured a degree of legitimacy through a traditionally academic avenue: a peer reviewed book. However, opportunities for sharing ideas and engaging in productive dialogue about practice have changed and expanded hugely with the advent of social media, offering opportunities for other forms of knowledge development and exchange (see e.g. Westwood, 2014). Questions about the role, impact and potential of these newer and more readily accessible forms of writing offer many exciting avenues for further research about practitioner writing.

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