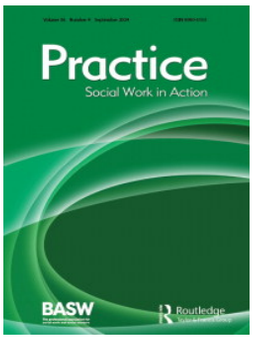

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# Reflections of Social Work Academics on Moving from Social Work Practice to the Academic Environment

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# Reflections of Social Work Academics on Moving from Social Work Practice to the Academic Environment

*Deanna Edwards and Kate Parkinson*

The social work academic field, in common with other professional qualification degrees requires academics to have substantial social work practice experience. This reflective paper explores the journey of two social work academics who have made the transition from practice to the academic environment within the last ten years. Having applied a duoethnographical approach, the authors discuss the potential challenges of making this transition but is more focused on the benefits that former social work practitioners bring to the academic and research environment. It discusses practice-based research and appreciative inquiry as beneficial research methods for social work research and the importance of engaging with people with lived experience in a collaborative approach to research. It emphasises that social workers with skills of engagement, critical analysis and managing challenging situations are well placed to undertake research and make recommendations for social work practice from an informed an 'expert' position.

*Keywords:* social work; practice to academia; family group conferences; duoethnography; practice-led research

## Introduction

This reflective piece was written by two social work academics with substantial social work practice experience in both Family Group Conferences and generic child protection practice in the UK. Both are qualified social workers who have worked as practitioners and service managers, who made the transition from social work practice to the academic field, within the last ten years. Both now teach, write and research on Family Group Conferences (FGCs), strength-based practice and other related fields. The aim of the piece is to explore the complex relationship between practice and academia in a practice-based academic field and to discuss some of the challenges of making this transition but more

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importantly to emphasise the benefits and skills that former social work practitioners bring to the academic and research environment.

A Family Group Conference is a decision- making process developed in New Zealand in the late 1980s and used in the UK since the early 1990s. It is used in both child welfare and adult social care throughout the UK. The authors have both been practitioners in child welfare FGCs and their teaching and research experience is largely within that field. An FGC is a decision-making process by which the wider family come together to plan for the child or adult for whom a decision needs to be made. An FGC coordinator is appointed to facilitate this process. The role of the coordinator is to prepare the family or the meeting and to help the family to decide who should attend. The meeting takes place in a neutral venue at a time and date to suit the family. The meeting itself comprises 3 stages facilitated by the coordinator and attended by the family, the referrer and any other workers the family have invited. The stages of an FGC are as follows:

### Information Sharing

Welcome and introductions, ground rules and an overview of the current family strengths and concerns from the referrer. This will include the question/s that need addressing at the meeting, the 'bottom line' (what can't become part of the family plan), and any resources the referrer can offer.

### *Private Family Time*

During this time anyone at the meeting in a professional capacity including the coordinator and referrer withdraws and leaves the family alone to address the question/s and come up with a plan.

### *Agreeing a Plan*

Once the family have developed their plan they will call workers back in to the meeting where the plan will be discussed. Referrers should agree plans that are safe, legal and address the concerns.

For a fuller explanation and discussion of FGCs see Edwards and Parkinson (2018).

FGCs have been widely researched by social work academics throughout their 35 years of use in child welfare decision making (Edwards and Parkinson 2018). Research has been mixed in terms of outcomes but recent research in the UK has suggested that they have positive outcomes in terms of keeping young people out of care and reducing the need for child care proceedings (Foundations 2023). As far as the authors are aware there are few FGC researchers who also have a practice background in FGCs. Whilst much of the

research has a focus on participants experiences of FGCs there are few pieces that include family members/FGC participants as co-authors on FGC academic articles. An exception to this is Wildbore, Edwards, and Parkinson (2023) which is a co-written piece by a person with lived experience collaborating with the current authors.

## Research Methodology

In reflecting upon their experiences of the transition from social work practice to the academic sphere, the authors have applied some of the principles and practices of duoethnography (Norris and Sawyer 2012). Duoethnography involves the researchers, as simultaneously participants, coming together to engage in conversational dialogue about a social phenomenon of mutual interest, in this case the transition from social work practice to the academic environment and explore how that has been experienced by the authors and shaped their academic practice. Duoethnography, like autoethnography is autobiographical in nature, but the focus is on how the researchers experienced and gave meaning to a given phenomenon and how those meanings changed over time (Breault 2016). Duoethnographers 'use themselves to assist themselves and others in better understanding the phenomenon under investigation' (Norris and Sawyer 2012, 13).

At the heart of duoethnographic research is a rigorous and thorough self-reflective process which enables the researchers to explore the intersections between the self and social life and in a conversation process, work together to untangle meanings, challenge each other's assumptions whilst taking into consideration broader narratives influencing their experience and the experience of others (Burleigh and Burm 2022).

As this research is focused on the authors' own experience, the duoethnographic approach lends itself to a thorough and vigorous understanding of this experience, due to the critical reflective process that the research necessitates.

Breault (2012) has highlighted that traditional academic thought about research methodology has undermined the importance of critical conversation and reflection as a research method, stating that the approach is unscientific, with the potential for researcher bias. As practice-based researchers, the authors argue that traditional 'scientific' approaches to research are not appropriate or indeed ethical for social work research, which should be for the benefit of social work practice. This practice wisdom or 'bias' prevents the research from being merely abstract or a theoretical conceptualisation created by researchers who do not have a practice focus or expertise, an issue that is further discussed later in the paper. Indeed, Guillemin and Gillam (2004) argue that reflexivity improves the ethical stance of research because a process of critical reflection allows the researcher to identify unexpected critical situations and respond to these in an ethical way.

Critical reflection and reflexive practice are now accepted as being a core part of social work across the globe (see Houston 2015; Taiwo 2022; Watts

2019). Social work practitioners are expected to engage in a process of critical reflection throughout their working lives with the aim of developing and improving their practice for the benefit of people that they are working to support (Social Work England N.D.
https://eur01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A//www.social-workengland.org.

Critical reflection is embedded in social work practice standards in several countries, including England and Wales (Social Work England, n.d, Taiwo 2022). Hence, the authors consider that research in the social work field should embed the core principles of the profession. The commentary notes from the Global Definition of Social Work (2014) state that,

'The uniqueness of social work research and theories is that they are applied and emancipatory. Much of social work research and theory is co-constructed with service users in an interactive, dialogic process and therefore informed by specific practice environments' (available online at https://www.ifsw.org/what-is-social-work/global-definition-of-social-work/).

This focus on a dialogic process has informed the author's decision to engage in duoethnography, which has dialogue at the core of the process (Burleigh and Burm 2022), to reflect upon their experiences.

Unlike in a traditional and 'pure' approach to duoethnography, where researchers' stories would be transcribed and presented as a conversation between the researchers (Sawyer and Norris 2012), the authors have instead drawn upon their stories in a further reflective process and brought together their shared experiences with existing research and evidence to present their reflections and transitional journey under the following headings:

- Moving from practice to academia
- From practitioners to researchers
- Practice-based Research
- A Social Work Approach to Research
- Implications for Practice

## Moving from Practice to Academia

It is relatively common in the UK in practice-based fields for practitioners to make the transition from practice to the academic environment and there is a body of research, largely from the field of health, which explores this often-difficult transition (Kearns, Fitzgerald, and Mahon 2023; Knittel, May, and Berger 2004; McDonald 2010).

Despite social work, as a discipline, having been taught as an academic subject in UK Higher Education institutions for decades, there is only one academic paper to date (Almond 2023), which explores the experience of social workers making the transition from practice to the academic environment. The exception is Seymour (2006) who wrote about her own transition from social work practice to an academic environment.

Both authors emphasise the challenges that social work practitioners face when making the transition into the academic environment. These include a lack of academic 'training' such as appropriate teaching qualifications, a lack of experience of academic writing and research and the difficulties involved in making a substantial change in role. Many new academics are likely to have been 'experts' in their field and in leadership positions but then enter the academic environment at the 'bottom' of the career ladder and can feel de-skilled and alienated, moving from being an 'expert to a novice' (McArthur-Rouse 2008). In addition, Jones, Loya, and Furman (2009) have written about the sense of not being perceived as 'real' or 'traditional' academic in the sense of taking a typical academic trajectory of student to academic. In many senses therefore it constitutes a considerable career shift.

Both researchers in their stories, highlighted this feeling of alienation and feeling like 'imposters' in an environment where they did not speak the language of academia and research. One example given was of this was that one of the researchers was questioned by a colleague about why they got paid more than someone with a PhD. This person had been a senior manager in a local authority setting with 15 years practice experience, but this was deemed by the colleague to be less valuable in the academic setting than having significantly less practice experience and a PhD. Of course, both are of value. One author spoke about hearing academic and research terms being 'thrown around' such as epistemology, ontology and feeling 'stupid' and having to write them down when in meetings to 'google later'. They went on to state:

'on googling the terms, I realised that they mean something really quite straightforward and that they are terms that apply to social work practice, not just research'.

In fact, the authors reflected upon the fact that in their day-to-day practice, social workers apply 'research skills'. In conducting complex assessments of need and risk, social workers undertake narrative interviews with people with lived experience, to understand how best to work alongside and support a family or individual. They also apply well developed skills of critical analysis to make sense of information gathered and make recommendations to address identified need and risk. Indeed Professor Jenny Harlock (2022) states that, 'I believe social workers and social care practitioners already have the skills and attributes to be excellent researchers: being curious about people, driven to make a difference, and unafraid of complexity. These are essential qualities for researchers, and have helped me in my own research journey' (What research means for frontline social workers | NIHR, available online).

Further discussion elicited feelings of alienation when attending meetings with colleagues from other academic disciplines who had not had a practitioner career beforehand and therefore found it unusual to come across an academic without a PhD. She also went on to discuss that she found it difficult to be described as an 'early career researcher' when in fact she was older,

quite late on in her career and had far more work experience (including research) than some of her academic colleagues.

This is just some of the many examples of feeling deskilled and devalued that practitioners who become academics may face when they make the transition into the academic environment. However, the overall aim of this piece is not to focus on this difficult transition but to consider the strengths and skills that experienced social work practitioners bring to the academic environment whilst recognising both the pitfalls and disadvantages of this.

Indeed, Almond (2023) cites Seymour (2006) to emphasise the unique and valuable contribution that former practising social workers can make to the academic field. These include the ability to teach authentically about practice and to be able to provide practice-based examples and case studies and a wealth of experience to draw on (Cleary, Horsfall, and Jackson 2010; Almond 2023). Furthermore, students experience of social work theory can often feel far removed from practice (Joubert 2021) and therefore teaching staff with practice experience can add authenticity to the process. Practitioner academics also often have contacts from practice which may include other practitioners and people with lived experience of services. These can further enhance and add 'realism' to the process of learning about social work. However, it must also be recognised that practitioners may lnot have the rigorous teaching and research skills and may be inexperienced at other tasks expected of the academic which include marking, examining and assessing students. They may also not have the traditionally expected academic qualifications which often include a PhD and a Higher Education teaching qualification.

## From Practitioners to Researchers

Making the transition from practitioner to researcher is ultimately likely to influence both how one researches and what one researches. In their duoethnographic discussions it was clear that both authors believe strongly that social work research should be for the benefit of social work practice and therefore ultimately for the recipients of social work services. Bogolub (2010) argues that social work research has an ethical mandate to 'bring about good' (page 10) so therefore social work research should aim to be of both academic and practical use. This of course includes being applicable to students who are learning about the social work process. One of the potential issues that may arise here is researching an area of previous practice. On the one hand the researcher's knowledge base and practice wisdom means that this could be ideal (Uggerhøj 2011). On the other hand, clearly it might also be argued that the potential for bias is heightened. However, Galdas (2017) argues that the notion of researcher bias is taken from a quantitative and scientific approach to research and is not applicable to qualitative research, which takes a more reflexive approach.

The authors also surmise that quantitative research is not value free either. Indeed, it is potentially shaped by the researchers interests, amongst many other things such as available funding. This is not so different from researching an area of previous practice which, presumably, is also an area of interest. Antaki (1999, 2001) demonstrated that even questionnaires, which are seemingly 'objective' are subject to researcher bias. Messner and Hitzler (2008) go on to argue that due to the nature, diversity and peculiarities of the social work role analytical approaches to research will yield little more than 'idealistic models of a social work practice that is far removed from the actors' realities' (50). Rather then, than aiming for 'evidence based practice, they argue we should aim for what Webb (2002) describes as 'practice based evidence'. Therefore, Uggerhøj (2011) argues that for social work research to have an impact on practice, knowledge must be presented from a practice perspective and that therefore the interface between research and practice is much more significant than in other areas of enquiry. The authors assert that practitioners and former practitioners are well placed to lead on research that draws both on practice wisdom and has relevance to current practice. The authors academic output has been a mix of information pieces such as books on both FGCs and strengths-based approaches (Edwards and Parkinson 2018; Edwards and Parkinson 2023), case studies on FGCs (Edwards et al. 2019; Parkinson, Pollock, and Edwards 2018), opinion pieces (Edwards, Parkinson, and Ryan 2021) and research based on an extensive evaluation of an FGC service (awaiting publication)

## Practice-Based Research

This shared philosophy on the importance of practice wisdom and experience has inevitably shaped the research undertaken by the authors, which can be described as practice-based research. Epstein (2001) refers to practice-based research as 'an approach to research that begins with practitioner questions, is informed by practice wisdom and conducted by practitioners' (17) and that it is '…about improving what we know and do…' (31). This definition is clearly appropriate for the author's research, which is informed by their own practice wisdom, that of fellow professionals and colleagues and the lived experience of users of social work services. Uggerhøj (2011) argues that social work research is well suited to practice-based research and that practice-based research creates informed solutions to social work issues and problems, rather than an abstract or theoretical conceptualisation created by researchers who do not have a practice focus or expertise.

One effective method that the authors have applied for conducting their practice-based research is that of appreciative inquiry. Grant and Humphries (2006) define appreciative inquiry as action research which brings together research and practice to lead to change. The focus of this is then to develop knowledge which can inform practice (Reeves et al. 2017). Grieten et al.

(2017) suggests that appreciative inquiry is a strengths-based approach to research, as the focus is in creating positive change. Furthermore, Bellinger and Elliot (2011) argue that appreciative inquiry is an under-used research method within social work and that the approach has the potential to promote good social work practice.

One of the criticisms of appreciative inquiry is that it in being overly positive about a concept, idea or method, it fails to adopt a critical approach (Fitzgerald, Murrell, and Newman 2001; Pratt 2002). However, Rogers and Fraser (2003, 75) state that 'Appreciation is not just looking at the good stuff'. Ridley-Duff and Duncan (2015) have argued that appreciative inquiry was developed by Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987) as a method of 'uncovering narratives of success' (1581) and argue that according to Grant and Humphries (2006) it is over-optimistic and poorly researched as an approach. They therefore argue that rather than focus upon APPRECIATIVE inquiry one should focus upon CRITICAL inquiry which does not shy away from exploring the negative aspects of experience but rather explores these alongside the more positive experiences, desires and aspirations (Grant 2006; Ridley-Duff and Duncan 2015) The authors do not consider that their research only looks at the 'good stuff'. It is possible to remain positive about an approach to practice whilst remaining realistic about what the potential pitfalls are. Indeed, researchers and practitioners both have the aim of benefitting practice for those who make use of services. Being unduly positive therefore serves no purpose. The authors argue that it is simplistic and naïve to assume that just because a researcher has a practice background in a particular area that they are any more susceptible to bias than any other researcher. Their research adopts a critical approach and explores critical perspectives of FGCs and strengths-based approaches to practice and potential barriers for applying the approaches in different fields of social work practice. In this sense, the research addresses the paradox between the positivity of the appreciative inquiry approach and the perceived negativity of a critical approach (Grant and Humphries 2006). This is, in effect a balanced approach and has allowed them to examine strengths and limitations and consider the potential of the approaches to improve social work practice and decision making.

## A Social Work Approach to Research

Research is essential to social work practice. It informs policy, guidance, and legislation as well as models, methods and approaches to practice. Practitioner experienced researchers are well placed to contribute to this field. Practice skills are useful in terms of engaging and interviewing those people with lived experience of services. Indeed, Crisp et al. (2003) identified that social workers need well developed skills in critical analysis and research for undertaking assessments of risk and need, skills directly applicable to the role of academic researcher.

The authors might go further and argue that people with lived experience of social work services not only make useful research 'subjects', but they may also make useful researchers, as they bring a wealth of knowledge and experience of receiving social work services, methods, and approaches. 'Co-creating' research which involves people with lived experience and practitioners should (arguably) be the gold standard of social work research. After all, collaborative approaches to social work, such as FGCs and other strengths- based approaches, with the underpinning assertion that the service user is the 'expert' are widely acknowledged to be best social work practice and underpin policy in both the children and families and adult social work fields (Edwards and Parkinson 2023). Therefore, the methods used to research such collaborative approaches, should be collaborative also.

Beresford (2007) has argued that including those with lived experience in research (and practice) is challenging but also transformative in terms of how, why and who we research for. Social work itself is challenging and experienced social work practitioners have well developed skills in managing challenging situations. Therefore, social work researchers with a practice background in managing challenging situations and applying collaborative approaches to practice are well placed to lead the way in collaborative approaches to research.

Fook, Johannessen, and Psoinos (2011) argue that partnerships between people with lived experience, practitioners and researchers can vastly improve social work and there have been several collaborative and co-produced research projects that have successfully taken place within the social work academic field. For a discussion of these see Denvall and Skillmark (2021). However, Tew (2008) warns us to pay close attention to power differentials inherent in these collaborations. There are a number of pertinent issues worthy of note here not least the likelihood as Osborne (2018) notes that people with lived experience of social work are often coerced rather than voluntary service users. Therefore the agency and capability sufficient for engagement may need to be built rather than assumed if we are to reduce or avoid tokenism and imbalances of status and power (Bevir, Needham, and Waring 2019) Once again, those researchers with practice experience, whilst not immune to creating these power differentials will at the very least have an awareness of them from a practice perspective and as a registered social worker a commitment to adhering to the ethics, values, and professional standards of the social work field. In addition engaging practitioners as well as people with lived experience of social care can be useful in negating some of this (Osborne, Radnor, and Strokosch 2016).

## Implications for Practice

When engaged in their duoethnographic discussions, the authors shared their thoughts on how they felt their transition from practice to the academic

environment could have been facilitated and potentially made less challenging. Some straightforward solutions were discussed, such as:

- An induction period that recognises a change in culture and allows an 'easing' into the academic environment.
- A change in culture across the academic environment that equates practice wisdom, experience, and expertise with academic knowledge.
- In the academic field more broadly, a recognition of practice-based approaches to research being as valid as traditional more 'scientific' approaches.
- More emphasis upon and support for collaborative and co-produced work in universities. In practice based academic fields this should include people with lived experience and practitioner led student recruitment, lectures, seminars, and research.

These points are not new and unique to the authors and have been emphasised in literature already discussed.

However, the point that was discussed at length between the researchers was the need to move away from a culture in social work of 'evidence-based practice' to that of 'practice-based evidence' (Barkham, Hardy, and Mellor-Clark 2010).

Since the late 1990s, social work, as a discipline has been preoccupied with evidence- based social work, based upon the idea that best practice is delivered by research informed evidence which is underpinned by vigorous and robust methodologies (Webb 2001). This has led to what Adams, Matto, and LeCroy (2009, 3) have described as a 'hierarchy or research evidence, with the randomised control trial (RCT) or true experiment at the top' (McNeece and Thyer 2004; Rosenthal 2006). However, Webb (2001, 57) argues that evidence-based practice, being based on a medical model of research and taken from the medical discipline is based upon a deterministic version of rationality which is 'unsatisfactory' for the field of social work and fails to acknowledge the complexities of social work practice and decision making. Aisenberg (2008) argues that the knowledge gained from RCTs is too generalisable and not applicable to the complex practice contexts of social work. Furthermore, Green (2014) argues that in an RCT everything is held constant, and the research takes place in the context of strict protocols which is not the way things work in the real world. Findings from practice- based research on the other hand are directly applicable to practice and informed by social work practice (Dodd and Epstein 2012). This then lends itself to the idea that social work research should be based upon practice-based evidence as opposed to evidence-based practice. This may at first, seem like a subtle shift. However, whereas the first is informed by academic researchers, who may or may not be practitioner 'experts' in the field and if they are not may be limited in their capacity to understand the complexities of the practice field, the latter is informed by practitioners and people with lived experience of social work services (Dodd and Epstein 2012).

There has long been a discussion in social work about their being a gap between research, with authors noting that this gap was first highlighted over 100 years ago (Denvall and Skillmark 2021). This is sometimes referred to as the '2 communities' theory' (Cornish 2017) highlighting a chasm between producers of research and practitioners/people with lived experience. There may be a variety of reasons why this gap is perceived to exist. Kjorstad (2008) argued that because research is based upon principles of validity and generalisability that it is of less use in practice. Green (2014) further argues that only a small number of research ideas make it to proposal stage and even fewer make it as far as being allocated funding and therefore being completed. Those that do, do always get published and those that are published do not always get read at least by practitioners. Even if they do make it this far, they need the support of time, money, and policymakers to be translated into interventions for the benefit people with lived experience.

## Conclusion

This reflective piece has explored the author's reflections of moving from social work practice into the academic world and the inextricable impact that this practice experience has had in shaping the author's research focus and their approach to research. It has touched upon the challenges that social work practitioners face when entering the academic world but more importantly, it has emphasised the strengths that social work practitioners bring to the field. These include the benefits of practitioner 'experts' researching their area of expertise and the practice skills, knowledge, and wisdom that social work practitioners bring to the academic environment. These skills of engagement and collaboration lend themselves to engaging in qualitative research and to the co-production of research with people with lived experience of social work services. The authors assert that those with practice experience of social work are best placed to undertake research focusing on social work practice and to make informed and nuanced recommendations to improve practice.

## Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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