

Title: Navigating social work practice research challenges: collaboration, participant rights and ethics.

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Abstract: In this article we discuss the challenges in engaging with research participants from marginalised communities; including from some minority communities where there are interconnecting issues of poverty, racism, school exclusion, family breakdown and sometimes youth crime. This is aligned with experiences of developing research partnerships with local services in evaluation work. Two research case-studies, from evaluation research with child and family social work and the youth justice system, discuss experiences of researching within inner-city areas, navigating researcher-practitioner relationships and maintaining ethical research standards. Entering the research field in both cases presented challenges related to sensitivities and distress experienced by participants. Our case study discussions demonstrate how the researchers responded to risk and unwitting involvement with young people in conflict, in prison and family bereavement.

Highlighted is the vital importance of local agencies providing accurate information about the families and young people that the researchers are asked to contact, to ensure respect and research ethics are upheld and no trauma is caused. Planning and building trust is key and ensuring time is given for respectful engagement and ensuring agencies are ready for ongoing support and follow up as needed. The paper will explore how these methodological considerations can be taken forwards.

Keywords: Practice research; vulnerable participants; sensitive topics; research ethics; research collaboration

Introduction/Background

Despite the body of evidence showing the value of research to social work practice (Goel, Hudson and Cowie, 2018) social work practitioners in the UK do not always have positive views of research on, or in, their practice, seeing it as time consuming, difficult to interpret and of little use to their day-to-day work (Gleeson, et al., 2023). As researchers we need to be aware of the concerns that some social work practitioners may have when deciding whether to be involved in a research project or not. Building collaborative partnerships with social workers and the organisations they work within is a vital element of practice-based research that can be overlooked in designing studies.

Research in and on social work has been described as being ‘embedded in a field of power relations’ (Engen, et al., 2019 p.735), between researchers and practitioners, researchers and participants, and practitioners and service users/participants. These power relations also encompass a range of different interests including the political, economic and administrative and can have influence on perceptions of knowledge production, and the development and enactment of social work services. Social work research often reflects the values of social justice and empowerment inherent in social work practice, and social workers can be protective of research participants with many preferring a co-produced approach to research within their practice. A challenge for social work research is finding ways to collaborate meaningfully across the spectrum of researchers, practitioners, policy makers and service users to create research that has potential to make tangible changes to policy and practice in pursuit of a more equitable society. Throughout this paper we refer to practice research to describe the two case studies of recent research projects we have conducted. These case studies were chosen as representative of some of the unexpected challenges encountered in conducting research alongside social work practitioners. Entering the research field in both cases presented challenges related to sensitivities and distress experienced by participants (Silverio et al., 2022). Participants in both of the studies would be considered marginalised and vulnerable due to their ethnicity, economic conditions, living arrangements, their age or their interactions with the justice system. Both studies were commissioned by the organisations that the research took place within and research proposals were discussed and agreed between the research team and the organisation in collaboration.

From our experience of these two research studies, four overlapping areas of the research process presented challenges that needed to be addressed as the research progressed. Some of these issues were anticipated and were built into the research design and ethical approval application, others were things that we had not considered in advance and had to be responded to almost as they happened.

1. Accessing and involving participants who are considered vulnerable and/or marginalised in society through gatekeepers who are also the research commissioners.
2. Balancing participant rights to be heard and have their views taken seriously with ethical principles of non-maleficence and responding to unintended consequences of involvement in the research process.
3. Maintaining collaborative working relationships with practitioner organisations while remaining critical and objective in the evaluation process and decisions on reporting findings.
4. The challenges of remaining within the role of the academic researcher, and the institutional expectations that are aligned to this, while also having experience as a social work practitioner and balancing that knowledge and its influence on the research process.

But, what do we mean by using the term 'practice research'? The term has been used in a variety of ways depending on the author, or the message being conveyed. Uggerhoj (2014) identifies three types of research that is conducted within social work practice, each with a unique and nuanced difference. *Practice Research on Social Work* is defined as research that is conducted and managed by researchers external to practice and does not include collaboration with practitioners. Practitioners will likely be participants in this type of research, but have no input into what is being researched or how the study is designed. The second type is labelled *Practitioner Research* and is identified as research that focuses on processes within practice and is practitioner led. This type of research often sits outside the academic platform and findings are likely to only be disseminated within a practice organisation. The third type of social work research is titled *Practice Research* and is defined as research that occurs through a close collaboration between researchers and social workers and proceeds through a partnership approach in design, conduct and dissemination of the research.

In 2011 an international group of social workers and researchers came together to explore ways to promote practice research and to ensure it is carried out in ethical and meaningful ways. The definition agreed on from this meeting articulates the purpose, and importance, of practice research to ensuring effective social work practice;

Practice research involves curiosity about practice. It is about identifying effective and promising ways in which to help people; and it is about challenging troubling practice through the critical examination of practice and the development of new ideas in the light of experience. It recognises that this is best done by practitioners in partnership with researchers, where (researchers) have as much, if not more, to learn from practitioners as practitioners have to learn from researchers. (Salisbury Forum Group, 2011).

The group promotes collaboration between practice and academia in the reciprocal nature of practice research. It highlights the need for more open discussion of how practice research is conducted and the importance of making use of both scientific research and practice-based knowledge in the creation of equitable and effective services. The aim of this paper, therefore, is to continue this discussion by highlighting some of the unique challenges encountered in social work practice research and to suggest ways to overcome them.

Brief description of our case studies

In this paper we will be using two of our recent research studies as case examples of challenges encountered in conducting practice research in social work. Both studies involved close collaborative working with professionals, included participants who experience marginalisation in society and both were focused on assessing the outcomes of practice for service users. We chose these as our case studies for this paper as they clearly illustrate the potential challenges of conducting practice research and offer potential responses to these challenges. The first study (referred to as the FLIP study below) was a qualitative evaluation of an innovative intervention for families with a child 'on the edge' of care, intended to improve family relations and prevent the child being taken into the care system. The second study (referred to as the Youth Justice study below) was a mixed methods exploratory study of a youth offending service that appeared to be successful in reducing ethnic disproportionality in their outcomes for young people in contact with the youth justice system.

The FLIP (Family Learning Intervention Project) study was a small-scale, qualitative, evaluation of an intervention designed by a child and family social work team that aimed to support families where there was a child 'on the edge of care' (Allain, et al., 2023). The aim of our evaluation was to understand the family's experiences of the intervention, whether it had longer term impact on family relationships and what could be changed to improve on the intervention for the future. The intervention was led by social workers and social pedagogues who worked with the whole family to prevent the child being taken into care. The local authority purchased a house outside of the area where families could spend up to five days with members of the social work team and would engage in family work and discussion. The purpose of the research study was to explore the experiences of the families who had been included in the intervention and the experiences of practitioners involved in the intervention. We conducted semi-structured interviews with seven parents and foster carers and three children of families who had received the intervention. We also interviewed seven social workers and social pedagogues with experience of involvement in the intervention.

The aim of the Youth Justice study was to determine whether a single youth offending service was reducing nationally reported ethnic disproportionality in outcomes for young people referred to the service. There is a long recognised disparity in youth justice outcomes for young people of ethnic minority backgrounds compared to their white counterparts in the UK (Lammy, 2016). The study was a mixed-methods, two phase, study. In the first phase we conducted secondary analysis on locally held quantitative data on the young people who had been referred to the service by the police over the previous five years. This phase of the study established that ethnic disproportionality within this youth offending service was indeed lower than that reported nationally. In the second phase we used a qualitative methodology to explore the potential reasons behind this difference and to understand the experiences of the young people who used the service and the professionals who worked with them. This phase included one-to-one semi-structured interviews with 11 young people either online, by phone or in person and a number of focus groups with a total of 14 professionals who worked within the service or in an adjacent service or organisation (e.g. speech and language therapists, police officers, family counsellors).

Negotiating with gatekeepers and marginalised participants

Marginalised groups are often difficult to identify and contact for participation in research and many research teams are dependent on social work organisations to assist in reaching an adequate sample size for their study. Gatekeepers (i.e. those individuals or organisations that hold contact information for potential participants) introduce complexity, potential bias and considerable additional time for researchers and can complicate the issue of who decides who should be invited to participate. When access to participants is controlled by the services being evaluated this can skew the sample pool in ways not always acceptable to researchers as reported by Martins, et al. (2018), where they describe the multiple layers of bureaucratic permissions, and subsequent additional paperwork, that were required for them to gain access to children and young people to invite them to take part in their research.

When participants are young people who have a relationship with those gatekeepers that naturally incurs a power imbalance, there is always the potential for coercion to take part, even if unintentional. Likewise, if the participants are former, or current, social work service users there is an unequal power differential between them and gatekeepers who represent the organisations. Gatekeepers will also often see themselves as responsible for the protection of potential participants and view their role as mediators between participants and researchers (Kay, 2019). The question for our research team to consider was, do these participants feel empowered enough to

decline an invitation to a research project without concerns that it will impact on the relationship with a case worker or social worker?

In the Youth Justice research project we were aware that we would not be able to identify the particular young people using this service without facilitation from gatekeepers (in this instance the young people's case workers). To avoid undue pressure on young people to agree to interview we used a two-step process where they would be given information about the research by a case worker and if interested would agree to their contact details being passed on to a researcher. The researcher would then make contact with the young person to assess their interest and if they were still willing to participate would arrange the interview. In this way, we were able to sample from a wide pool of possible participants, but allowed them time to consider their involvement and the final decision to be interviewed was discussed with a researcher outside of the youth justice services they were engaged with.

Approximately half of the young people identified by the youth offending service as being interested in the study, later declined or initially arranged to meet with us but did not turn up on the day and did not respond to multiple follow ups. This may be an indication that young people felt that they could not refuse involvement in the research to their case worker and may have been reluctant to honestly tell the researcher they did not want to participate. Reflecting on the data we did collect with young people, their experiences were consistently positive perhaps indicating some selection bias on the part of both the gatekeepers and the participants themselves. Discussions with case workers did explore also including those who had not completed the intervention, or who may have had fewer positive experiences; none of these young people agreed to be interviewed however. With a group who are well documented as being challenging to engage in research, and in youth justice interventions (Duke, et al., 2021), other options to include them in the research were limited. Data protection for these young people was paramount and we could not ethically have accessed contact details for them. Using the experience and knowledge of the gatekeepers to identify those who would be likely to take part in an interview with a stranger about their experiences in a stigmatising intervention was necessary to facilitate the conduct of the research that would not have been possible otherwise (Kay, 2019).

In the FLIP project, personal information about the families who had received the intervention was understandably held confidentially by the social work team and the only way for us as researchers to identify and invite these participants to the study was via social work gatekeepers. Data protection is a high priority for children and family services and while the service had commissioned the research team to conduct the evaluation, they felt it would be a breach of GDPR (General Data Protection Regulations) to allow us unsupervised access to participant information once this stage of the study was ready to proceed. Our first attempt to recruit participants therefore came via the gatekeepers who posted a letter to each of the families who had received the intervention with an invitation to take part in the study, to be indicated by signing and returning an enclosed form. This yielded a response of just two interested participants. Through discussion with the intervention team it became clear that a different approach to recruitment would be required if we hoped to sample enough families to make the research meaningful. For the second attempt at recruitment, it was agreed that two researchers would come to the child and family services office and would be supervised in jointly accessing the database of selected families and telephone them to invite them to the evaluation study.

Those families who were experiencing current difficulties (e.g. mental health distress, physical illness, family trauma) were to be highlighted by the social workers as families that we decided not to contact so as to limit additional pressure on them at the time. However, we encountered a

number of instances where these data were not up to date and the researchers contacted a small number of families who had recently experienced traumatic events that should not have been part of our contact list. The researchers were wholly unprepared for these scenarios and felt guilt at having intruded on these families at such a time and subsequent frustration that the data had not been adequately screened. This was not something that had been anticipated when designing the research and no plan was in place on how to deal with it. The research team did, however, have regular debriefing meetings throughout the study duration and this platform was able to help researchers talk through their distress and to ensure similar experiences did not re-occur.

Participant rights and ethical principles

Ethical practice in social work research has been debated for a number of decades, and there have been calls to produce an ethical framework that more directly addresses the particular experiences encountered in social work research that are not considered in university institutional ethics review committees (Butler, 2002; Engen, et al., 2019; Muller, et al., 2022). While the basic principles of ethical conduct in research apply to all research, such as participant confidentiality, informed consent and principles of non-maleficence ('do no harm'), it is argued that within social work research there are further considerations to account for.

These include ethical challenges surrounding relationships with gatekeepers, unexpected, and potentially harmful, situations whilst collecting data, the power dynamics inherent in the inclusion of service user participants and, challenges of finding the 'right' balance between critique and encouragement in reporting on findings (Muller, et al., 2022). Practice research frequently involves research on sensitive topics, and potentially in challenging contexts. The majority of the literature on researching sensitive topics tends to focus on protecting/safeguarding participants, adhering to strict ethical standards and avoiding coercion of participants (Martins, et al., 2018). There has been much less written on how researchers can best navigate exposure to often distressing information and how to prevent the potential negative impacts of these experiences.

In both of our research case studies we included participants who would be considered vulnerable, marginalised and in need of additional ethical protection during data collection. In the FLIP study these included families living in severe disadvantage and poverty and some who were experiencing homelessness. In the Youth Justice study some of our participants were under 18 years old and had been subjected to the processes of the criminal justice system, had been excluded from school or had recognised learning and communication difficulties. Our challenge was to ensure a balance of protection from harm (maleficence) and upholding the rights for service users to have their voices heard on issues that directly affected them through the use of social services. Much of the literature on research ethics that discusses vulnerability in research participants focuses on children, due to age and potential capacity for genuine informed consent, and there is very little written about vulnerability in adults involved in research.

Sobocan and colleagues (2021) argue that in social work research the ethical principle of non-maleficence (do no harm), is broader than that outlined in institutional ethics requirements and includes issues of ensuring protection of psychological, economic and social harms. As a research team we were uncomfortable at possibly having caused distress to families at a difficult time for them, and needed to re-evaluate our approach to recruitment to ensure it did not happen again. On reflection, our collaborative relationship with the social work organisation was not working as intended and ethical responsibilities from the researcher's viewpoint should have been discussed in

more detail in the early stages of the project to avoid such issues (Martins, et al., 2018). For the research team, this was a lesson that we took forward into future research studies with vulnerable and marginalised participants.

Guillemin and Gillam (2004) argue for the adoption of reflexive research processes in qualitative research that takes account of, not just the methods and data collection or analysis, but also of the social, political and economic positions within society of the researcher and participants. This is seen as an ongoing process throughout the research project and helps to place ethical research practices at the centre of the project. Being a reflexive researcher encourages deeper consideration of how a research intervention impacts on participants, and helps the research begin to formulate responses to unexpected ethical dilemmas should they arise during the course of conducting the research.

Maintaining collaborative relationships with practice organisations

Both of the case studies described in this paper were directly commissioned by the organisations being evaluated with the remit to provide an objective and balanced assessment of the impact of their interventions. Such an agreement does not however eliminate the potentially problematic issue of conducting evaluative research within an organisation that is enthusiastic about their work and act as gatekeepers to participants. The questions for the research teams in these instances was; how do we find, and maintain, the 'fine line' between authentic research that may be critical and building working relationships with partners that you may want to collaborate with again in the future?

Collaborative working between social work researchers and practitioners has the potential to stimulate learning in practitioners about how services are received by service users and to enhance understanding about practice amongst researchers (Gredig, et al., 2021). The types of collaborative relationship formed in social work research projects can be influenced by culture (both external and internal to organisations), practice Vs research goals and, relational dynamics between researchers and practitioners (Gredig, et al., 2021). Flexibility is key to conducting practice research that allows for genuine collaboration between researchers and practitioners and to ensure the nuances of particular research topics are fully explored and understood (Uggerhoj, 2014).

In both projects there was an underlying, though not explicitly stated, expectation that the research findings would show the interventions in a positive light. The professionals involved had dedicated considerable time and energy to implementing the interventions and felt that they were offering something unique and meaningful to service users. This creates a dilemma for researchers on how to present and address findings that may be critical of, or challenging to, the social work practice group. When participants are selected via gatekeepers who have a vested interest in showing their intervention in the best possible light, identifying areas that need improvement can become difficult (Uggerhoj, 2014).

This became a more pertinent challenge in the FLIP project and the second, qualitative, phase of the Youth Justice project. The first phase of the Youth Justice project was based on a large quantitative dataset and findings were clear in showing outcomes for young people. In this case they were largely positive as they related to the youth offending intervention so they could be presented objectively and openly. In the qualitative research projects, participant numbers were relatively low and interpretations of the data analysis are by their nature subject to the biases (however unintentional) of the researchers. In the Youth Justice study our qualitative findings aligned with reports from independent government body inspections, and were on the whole very positive. The critiques from service users presented in the final report were accepted as something the service was aware of and

had already committed to improving. In the FLIP project, our final report coincided with the first national lockdown that was called due to COVID 19 and this meant that, while both research teams and social work teams were finding ways to adapt to working remotely, the report was not discussed collaboratively as would be expected. The pandemic also meant that the intervention itself had to be paused as there were legal restrictions on travel and mixing with people outside of the immediate family. Within this report there were a number of critiques from service users and staff relating to the management and oversight of the intervention that needed to be addressed to improve the intervention. Despite the impacts of the pandemic, had we spent more time building that collaborative relationship necessary, which would have meant more time spent in discussion about the project and emerging findings, our report may have had a greater influence on future iterations of the intervention (Gredig, et al., 2021; Mertens and Ginsberg, 2008)

Researcher and practitioner role conflicts

Both of the case studies discussed here could be labelled as 'practice near' research projects (Silverio, et al., 2022). The aims of practice near research are to reduce the gaps between practice and research and to help build a knowledge base that is inclusive and collaborative, and that can help to improve how services are delivered for service users and for practitioners (Froggett and Briggs, 2009). There have been calls for more research that includes practitioners and service users as contributors to research design, data collection and analysis partly in response to the 'external and practice distant discourse' (Froggett and Briggs, 2009, p.377) seen to be emerging in social work research with the advent of the evidence-based practice movement initiated by many governments (White, et al., 2009). Conducting research that is near to practice helps to provide deep understanding of the impacts of service provision and how policy directives affect practitioners and the services they provide.

Practice near research, while offering an opportunity for close collaboration between researchers and social workers, can also involve emotional and psychological challenges for the researcher (Silverio, et al., 2022). This can include experiences of unexpected conflicts between research participants and other young people where there are issues of protecting 'territories' or seeking to settle previous arguments, as happened when one of our researchers met with a participant for interview in the FLIP study. Kumar and Cavallaro (2017) identify four ways that research within social work practice can prove to be emotionally demanding; 1) research on sensitive, difficult to hear, topics; 2) research on a traumatic topic experienced by the researcher; 3) external experiences in the researchers' life while conducting research and; 4) unexpected events arising during the research that were not prepared for. In the case studies discussed in this paper, we have discussed our experiences of researching sensitive topics (1) and unexpected events that occurred during the research process (4).

Both of our case study examples were evaluation studies aimed at understanding the experiences of those using the intervention services and of highlighting key areas for improvement. In the FLIP study the social work organisation had previously commissioned a cost-benefit analysis of the intervention which showed promising results. Our research study was aimed at understanding how those involved in the intervention experienced it and what recommendations they would suggest as improvements for future cycles. In this research study we worked closely with the social work team delivering the intervention both as gatekeepers to service user participants and as participants themselves. For those on the research team who are also experienced social workers, the line between objective and external researcher and social worker with a duty to intervene and support

service users was sometimes difficult to maintain. Our participants in this study were often experiencing the negative impacts of poverty, homelessness and violence. This led the research team to understand the data we had collected in a more holistic way by putting their experiences into the context of their everyday lives from the perspective of both the service user and the social worker assigned to their case.

In the Youth Justice study, the professionals involved in the intervention were more varied and included youth workers, speech and language therapists and police officers alongside social workers. The young people we interviewed for this study had many of the same life challenges as those more widely encountered in child and family social work settings. The social work researchers on the research team therefore had previous understanding of some of the issues in these young people's lives prior to data collection. This may have impacted on the interview environment in one of two ways. For the researchers it gave them some prior insight into the lives of the young people being interviewed and could have fostered a more comfortable and open space for discussion. Alternatively, the young person may have been influenced by prior experience with social work services, either positive or negative, in ways that we had not anticipated or could later fully discern.

Being aware of the potential for role conflict in practice near research is important for both the research team and the social work team involved in a research study. Understanding how this may create discomfort and distress in the researcher when discussing sensitive topics with participants and being unable to intervene and how to cope with this, could be built into research protocols. Ensuring that social work teams, as research commissioners and participants, fully acknowledge the limitations and responsibilities of their role and that of the researchers can help to create the collaborative working partnerships highlighted in the previous section. These steps can contribute to the creation of research that has the potential to generate new knowledge for both parties and to actively create better services for those in need of them.

Discussion and conclusion

The primary purpose of social work research should be to improve services drawing on research evidence which can change and transform practice and which empowers and gives voice to social work service users and to facilitate their full inclusion in society (Butler, 2002; Engen, et al., 2019). Research that evaluates social work interventions and allows for marginalised, or vulnerable, communities who receive these services to be listened to can achieve this when done well. However, it can be challenging to accomplish when there are competing political, administrative and economic interests involved (Engen, et al., 2019). To illustrate some of these challenges, and to offer some suggestions on how they might be addressed, we used two examples of recent practice research studies we have conducted with marginalised communities in receipt of social services. We identified four key challenges encountered through our experience and provide reflections on how they were addressed (or not) in these research studies.

As with much practice research (Uggerhoj, 2014) our case studies required permission and facilitation from gatekeepers to access our research participants. Gatekeepers can often be seen as a barrier to research and may be perceived as overly bureaucratic and protective of service user participants (Kay, 2019). However, without their input it would be impossible to recruit participants and to conduct research like ours within a restricted timeframe and budget. Due to the nature of their involvement with social services we had few options available to identify and make contact with participants for these research studies. While we have to accept that there is the potential for selection bias when those being evaluated are in control of who is invited to take part in the

research (Martins, et al., 2018) we also have to acknowledge that this can be true for all research studies to some extent.

Additional consideration needs to be given to ensuring that participants in these studies did not feel coerced into participation in recognition of the inherent power dynamics involved. We tried to do this by only using gatekeepers to identify possible participants for us to contact (FLIP project), or by using a three-step process for consent (Youth Justice project). This allowed for participants who did not want to take part to decline to researchers, rather than service providers whilst maintaining confidentiality. We also ensured participants had sufficient time to read information sheets, ask questions of the researchers and make an informed decision about their participation. As reported above, some potential participants did this through non-response after agreeing to be interviewed, but it still meant that the power of the decision rested with them and not the research team.

A second important factor with service user participants is that of the ethical responsibilities on both social work organisations and researchers to ensure that their rights are upheld and they are not exposed to unnecessary harm. There have been calls to produce a social work practice research code of ethics that would work alongside existing institutional committees (Butler, 2002; Engen, et al., 2019; Muller, et al., 2022). In our case studies both of the organisations we conducted our research with did have their own research oversight bodies, but the requirements from these varied little from those of our university and did not include the nuanced issues likely to occur in practice research. A broader dialogue between universities and local ethics committees to help frame such a code of ethics would be a welcome advancement for researchers and practitioners.

This code could include consideration of how to protect practice researchers from negative impacts of researching sensitive, and potentially traumatic, topics. We found two ways of helping to manage unexpected and distressing conversations, through regular debriefing meetings as a team and through post-study reflection. Both helped us to consider ways that we could anticipate these circumstances in the future, and has the potential to make us more sensitive and aware to the particular challenges faced by our participants. In particular, given that our participant groups had clear experiences with poverty, discrimination and social exclusion, this has led us to reflect on how we can ensure this context is built into future research protocols and how it can inform data analysis.

Developing effective research-practice partnerships is key to facilitating meaningful and authentic research that can have impact on both practice and policy in upholding social justice and empowerment of service users. Collaboration between researchers and practitioners can be seen as a process where negotiation is central to developing practice research that is meaningful (Uggerhoj, 2014). Gredig and colleagues (2021) identified three ways of doing this; 1) creating informal relationships and contacts with between key stakeholders; 2) working on defined research projects and; 3) generating an atmosphere where differences can be discussed and negotiated. This may help to overcome some of the challenges inherent in modern funding models for research, where what can be researched is usually pre-determined by funders. Both of our case study research projects were initiated by the organisations and the existing relationships, built up over years of collaboration, helped to create a framework for discussion and adaptation to suit the needs and perspectives of both practitioners and researchers. Nonetheless, as outlined above, this did not guarantee smooth running throughout the projects and particular challenges were still encountered.

For example, the growing emphasis on evidence-based practice within social work has created a more 'practice distant', and external, approach to much research on social work interventions (Froggett and Briggs, 2009; Gleeson, et al., 2023). While many governments have adopted the call to

create more 'evidence-based' social work practice, with the intention of providing more effective intervention to some of society's most vulnerable members, there is a general lack of research evidence within social work practice to draw on to fully realise this ambition (Helsinki statement on social work practice research, 2014). This is however, growing in recent years with the introduction of evidence centres in the UK for example (Practice in Research and Foundations) with an increased emphasis on identifying best practice within social work practice and how interventions impact on the lives of service users. The goal for social work researchers should be to find the most effective ways to integrate this body of evidence with the ethical principles embodied within research and social work practice to provide useful and meaningful new knowledge for practice.

Practice near research is important therefore to provide evidence and understanding that can meaningfully contribute to service improvements. This can be by interrogating how practitioners enact policy changes (e.g. White, et al., 2009), or to understand how new ways of providing services can impact on outcomes for service users (Foundations, 2023). There were also particular challenges associated with conducting practice near research in both of our examples. Researchers with prior practice experience can find themselves dealing with role conflict when they encounter participants in need of social work intervention. Maintaining the researcher role, of an external observer objectively gathering data from participants, can be a fine balance. There are of course instances where intervention is required, from any researcher, such as when a participant is clearly at risk of imminent harm, but in other, more subtle, cases the need to balance a desire to help with the participant's right to confidentiality can be a delicate one. It may be necessary to remind ourselves that we are conducting practice near research and not research in practice (Uggerhoj, 2014).

Practice research has the potential to build new knowledge that is meaningful to those who receive social work services. It can benefit researchers, in their understanding of social work, and social work practitioners, in their understanding of how service users experience interventions. In order to assess whether policy change is effective, if interventions have genuine benefit, or to identify where improvements to services should be targeted, practice research can be invaluable. As with any form of research, practice research has its challenges. In this paper we aimed to continue the discussion of how to recognise and address some of these challenges in order to support practice researchers in their pursuit of new understandings of social work practice.

In summary, the four challenges of engaging in practice research that we have discussed here suggest a need for greater focus on building collaborative relationships between researchers and practitioners, acknowledgement of the limitations of existing ethical requirements for research and consideration of the emotional impact of conducting sensitive research on researchers themselves. We have outlined some of the ways that we attempted to address these challenges, but further reflection is still required to assure authentic research continues to be conducted within and in partnership with social work practice.

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