



University of Dundee

'It's What Gets Through People's Radars Isn't It'

Smith, Mark; Wilkinson, Heather; Gallagher, Michael

Published in:
Contemporary Social Science

DOI:
[10.1080/21582041.2012.751499](https://doi.org/10.1080/21582041.2012.751499)

Publication date:
2013

Document Version
Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication in Discovery Research Portal](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Smith, M., Wilkinson, H., & Gallagher, M. (2013). 'It's What Gets Through People's Radars Isn't It': relationships in social work practice and knowledge exchange. *Contemporary Social Science*, 8(3), 292-306. DOI: 10.1080/21582041.2012.751499

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in Discovery Research Portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from Discovery Research Portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain.
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal.

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

Edinburgh Research Explorer

'It's What Gets Through People's Radars Isn't It'

Citation for published version:

Smith, M, Wilkinson, H & Gallagher, M 2013, 'It's What Gets Through People's Radars Isn't It': Relationships in Social Work Practice and Knowledge Exchange' *Contemporary Social Science*. DOI: 10.1080/21582041.2012.751499

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1080/21582041.2012.751499](https://doi.org/10.1080/21582041.2012.751499)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

Contemporary Social Science

Publisher Rights Statement:

This is an Author's Accepted Manuscript of an article published in the *Contemporary Social Science*, 2013. Copyright Taylor & Francis, available online at: <http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/21582041.2012.751499>

General rights

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact openaccess@ed.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



Full Title: *“It’s what gets through people’s radars isn’t it”*: Relationships in social work practice and knowledge exchange

Running Title: Relationships in social work practice and knowledge exchange

Abstract: This article draws on findings from a knowledge exchange (KE) project, which involved academics working with local authority social workers around a theme of engaging with involuntary clients. The user engagement agenda is actively promoted in social work but is not straightforward, reflecting a mish-mash of client rights, managerial and consumerist agendas. Engaging with involuntary clients, in particular, those whose involvement with social work is mandated by law, rarely fits into policy agendas and requires a range of conditions and practitioner skills for it to happen effectively. A parallel aim of our project was to explore what was seen to be effective in the KE and knowledge mobilisation (KM) processes when local authorities and university academics work together. Like client engagement, KE is also seen as ‘a good thing’ but in reality it is similarly problematic. In this article we trace the growth of both client engagement and KE agendas, particularly in relation to social work. We describe our project and discuss its findings. A number of parallel processes might be identified in ‘what works’ with hard to reach social work clients and ‘what works’ in KE/KM. Neither are linear or necessarily rational processes. What does seem to hold both together, however, is the nature of relationships built up between, in the first instance, social workers and those they work with and, in the second, between academics and local authority practitioners. These findings suggest that personal qualities that might be associated with the concept of emotional intelligence play an important part in enabling both social work practice and KE/KM to happen effectively.

Keywords: social work, knowledge exchange, local authorities, relationships

Authors: Mark Smith (Social Work, University of Edinburgh), Heather Wilkinson (School of Health in Social Science, University of Edinburgh), Mark Gallagher (School of Geographical and Earth Sciences, University of Glasgow)

Address for correspondence:

Mark Smith

Senior Lecturer in Social Work

University of Edinburgh

School of Social and Political Science

Chrystal MacMillan Building

15A George Square

Edinburgh

EH8 9LD

Introduction

This article reports on a knowledge exchange project in social work around the theme of engaging with involuntary clients, by which we mean those whose involvement with social work services is mandated by law. Examples of such groups might be families in the child protection system, offenders in the criminal justice system, mental health service users who are subject to compulsory measures of care and adults with learning disabilities. In this paper we focus mostly on involuntary users of children and families services. A parallel focus of the article is to consider what worked in the knowledge exchange (KE) process between university academics and local authority staff. In the article we trace the growth of both client engagement and KE agendas, particularly in relation to social work. We describe our project and discuss its findings. We conclude that there were similar processes at play between what worked in social work practice with involuntary clients and in KE. In each case, processes were ‘messy’, non-linear and often serendipitous. Crucially, the development of relationships was central. Key elements of these relationships included the establishment of trust, a sense of credibility and a sense that the focus of such relationships was timely and meaningful to participants within them. This focus on relationships and emotions links to the debate around the centrality of relationship-based practice in social work now re-emerging in the academic literature, following a period of a positivist and technical/rational focus on notions of evidence based practice. We identify similar forces at play in respect of KE and argue that qualities of credibility, reflexivity and emotion are central to its effectiveness. Prevailing managerial cultures in social work can impede the establishment and continuity of the kind of relationships from which effective social work practice might emerge. Likewise, policy and academic assumptions about knowledge exchange and mobilisation as instrumental and linear processes are likely to be ineffective if they fail to understand the messiness and complexity of the

relationships that underpin them. While the KE agenda is fairly well established at central government level, local authorities are relatively new partners in this process. During times of austerity the temptation for them might be to retrench to core service delivery. On the other hand, the ways in which they do deliver social work services is subject to major criticism from government reviews (e.g. Scottish Executive, 2006; Munro, 2011). Collaboration with academic partners would seem to have some potential to ‘unfreeze’ local authority cultures, in helping social work retain or reclaim its value base in increasingly procedurally driven contexts and in helping ensure that policies and practices are able to respond to these external agendas. We identify some examples from our project of what seemed to help and hinder this process and suggest some synergies between effective social work practice and effective KE.

Context

Common strands can be identified within both the user engagement and KE agendas, especially in their genesis within political cultures stressing, primarily, managerial and technical rational policy assumptions. We consider both of these agendas to provide a backdrop to our subsequent KE work.

The user engagement agenda

The participation of those who use social work services in their planning and delivery has become an expectation in UK social policy over recent years (Hinton et al, 2008). There is, however, a lack of clarity around what is meant by terms such as ‘participation’ and ‘engagement’. Some of the difficulties apparent in the user engagement agenda are a consequence of its often-contradictory drivers. Much of its

early impetus came from service-user activist groups (e.g. disabled people, mental health service users) mounting campaigns for change through activities such as self-organisation, public demonstrations, advocacy and lobbying. Such movements tend to employ a discourse of rights, constructing user engagement as a way of ensuring social justice by empowering people to make their voices heard (Beresford, 2000; Beresford and Croft, 2001; Postle and Beresford, 2007). Running alongside this, however, within neoliberal discourse, statutory bodies have constructed user engagement as a way of ensuring that individuals feel listened to, and are therefore more amenable to government policies. Simmons and Birchall note, "*it has been argued that participatory initiatives play a role in legitimizing a public sector in which trust in government is low*" (2005: 262). Consumerist discourses add a third layer, constructing social work users as customers within a capitalist market (e.g. Scottish Executive, 2006). Such notions have been a key part of moves to 'modernise' and 'reform' public services, with user participation heralded as a means of ensuring greater efficiency and accountability. This becomes a pressing concern in current times of austerity where the demand for welfare continues to extend in line with changing demographics and expectations, while the capacities of services remain stubbornly limited (Clark and Smith, 2011).

Participative notions of user engagement become more troublesome with involuntary clients. Consumerist discourses are particularly problematic. Families involved in child protection systems, for example, often prey to capricious decision making from statutory authorities, cannot reasonably be viewed as consumers of those interventions. Rights-based discourses, meanwhile, invoke the image of families whose members know what they want and can articulate this in a relatively clear, coherent and consistent

way. Again, this may not be the case, particularly where families are experiencing distress and crisis and struggling to understand what is happening.

Moreover, social workers do not ply their trade in the abstract; their engagements with clients are not neutral and free-floating. Rather, they are to a greater or lesser extent tied down, influenced and shaped by wider socio-economic, political and cultural contexts (Hennessey, 2011). The dominant culture over the past three decades has been a managerial one which has sought to realign social work along a market led model measured against technical/rational considerations of efficiency, economy and effectiveness (Tsui and Cheung, 2004). Social work with children and families became subject to particular political pressures. From the 1980s, it assumed a predominant child protection focus (Parton, 1985). Since then, various attempts have been made to refocus practice towards broader family support roles (e.g. DOH, 1995). However, in the 'risk society' (Beck, 1992; Webb 2006), risk has become institutionalized and reified to the extent that it dominates the thinking of policy-makers, managers and practitioners, crowding out arguably more important concerns about client needs or rights (Houston and Griffiths, 2000). As a consequence, social work practice with children and families remains stubbornly fixed upon child protection (Lonne et al, 2009). This has led to significant net widening, whereby the state becomes involved in the lives of more and more families under a justification of 'child protection' (Parton, 1999). Additionally, the managerial philosophies and systems that began to influence social work and public services more generally over that period have resulted in child protection practice that is overly bureaucratic and procedural, and that is arguably doing more harm than good in the lives of families (Lonne et al, 2009).

This dominant political and professional culture has fundamentally shifted the nature of the social work role, from an erstwhile focus around nurture and support to one that has become increasingly oriented towards organisational imperatives (Ruch et al, 2010).

This, in turn, has changed the nature of knowledge within the profession; “*Practice was increasingly seen in terms of technical-rational competencies rather than professional values, knowledge and skills*” (Ruch et al, 2010: 23). Local authority social work, in particular, has been prey to such reductionist developments, which, according to Howe (1996: 92), are “*antithetical to depth explanations, professional discretion, creative practice and tolerance of complexity and uncertainty*” (cited in Ruch et al, 2010: 23).

The problems caused by managerial approaches to social work are acknowledged in *Changing Lives*, the Report of the 21st Century Social Work Review (Scottish Executive, 2006) which identifies a social work profession lacking in confidence in its own skills and unclear about its distinctive contribution to society. It goes on to identify the lack of professional autonomy amongst social workers within managerial systems. It concludes that social work has lost touch with some of its core purpose and calls for transformational culture change across the profession.

The need for such change in children and families services assumes a particular timeliness in the wake of the recent UK government-sponsored review of child protection in England and Wales conducted by Professor Eileen Munro (2011). Munro argues for fundamental change in child protection practice and culture. Her report casts a light on existing procedurally driven social work cultures and identifies the need to revive more relationally based ways of working. She also suggests lessons about knowledge exchange, identifying a need to “*help professionals move from a compliance*

culture to a learning culture” (2011: 6). While the writ of the Munro Review does not extend to Scotland, the issues it identifies apply across the different jurisdictions in the UK.

The Knowledge Exchange/mobilisation agenda

The growth of interest in KE might be thought to reflect similar trends to that of client engagement. Current practices are grounded in discourses emerging during the 1990s, focusing on ‘evidence-based’ policy, and calling for “*developments in both capabilities and competencies for the better use of evidence in policy and practice*” (Boaz et al., 2008: 236). Historically, social work agencies have invested in training events and initiatives in the hope that learning on these might be cascaded from participants into wider organisational structures. The evidence for this sort of transfer of learning is not strong. On the contrary, it is known that very little training activity results in positive changes to practice (Skinner, 2011).

Academic response to these discourses around knowledge exchange has included the development of theories of knowledge transfer and exchange (Davies et al, 2000). Latterly, the importance of roles of intermediaries and knowledge brokers has emerged, as those who stimulate and instigate exchanges between academics and practitioners (Boaz et al, 2008). Alongside academic developments, policy interest has encouraged greater use of research and evidence in practice leading to a focus on partnerships between academics and practitioners. It has been claimed that such partnerships may be “*the most important factor determining whether or not research evidence is used by decision-makers.*” (Mitchell et al, 2009: 104). Since 1997 the UK’s Local Authorities and Research Councils’ Initiative (LARCI) has aimed to “*encourage and facilitate*

knowledge exchange between the research councils and local authorities at a strategic and operational level.” (Boaz et al, 2008: 237).

Closely aligned to these theoretical and policy shifts are arguments about the value of knowledge that is co-produced between academics and practitioners or policy makers. Co-production can be understood as a situation in which “*users are involved throughout the research process, from agenda-setting, through design, fieldwork and communication of outcomes*” (Armstrong and Alsop, 2010: 209). It has been suggested that such co-production ensures that research benefits from the local knowledge of practitioners, generates more practice-relevant research, and enables academics to improve their ability to communicate to wider audiences (Antonacopoulou, 2010; Orr and Bennett, 2010).

Practitioner research is currently on the rise, particularly within social work (Cunningham, 2008; Fouche and Lunt, 2010; Lunt et al, 2010; Mitchell et al, 2010). Given the growing recognition of “*the active role that individual practitioners play in how research gets used*” (Nutley et al, 2007: 43), practitioner research can be seen as a way to operationalise the shift from knowledge transfer to knowledge exchange. In the context of social work, it is also arguably more appropriate than the evidence based practice model (Petch, 2009); the latter originated in medicine, a profession dominated by positivistic understandings of science and knowledge, whereas social work, by contrast, has always been an explicitly value-laden profession, in which practitioners’ judgments and interpretations play an essential role (Nevo and Slonim-Nevo, 2011).

Engaging with Scottish Local Authorities

It is against this backdrop that we undertook the project reported on in this paper. The project took place within the Engaging with Scottish Local Authorities initiative funded by the Scottish Funding Council (SFC), the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and ‘the Local Authorities and Research Councils’ Initiative’ (LARCI). The intention of the scheme was to foster better research and knowledge mobilisation links between universities and local authorities. The project involved a partnership between six local authorities in South East Scotland and the University of Edinburgh. The theme of engaging involuntary service users emerged in planning meetings as one of critical importance to the participating local authorities. In this sense practitioner concerns around the need to resurrect more relationally based practice ran in tandem with the emerging messages from major policy reviews such as *Changing Lives* and Munro.

Objectives for the project were identified to understand and explore the context in which social work with involuntary service users takes place, and to gather and share evidence of what practitioners felt ‘worked’ in engaging and supporting such clients. We utilized a range of KE methods to engage in a process of training and capacity building across the six local authority sites including: a scoping review of recent research on user engagement in social work. This was presented as a short, accessible briefing and two literature reviews (see <http://bit.ly/jbfXtj>); knowledge sharing seminars, bringing together academics and social work staff from six local authorities; practitioner research projects (PRPs) in which practitioners from each local authority carried out small studies on topics relating to engaging with involuntary service users of social work, with mentoring and training from academics at the University. One local authority undertook two pieces of practitioner research. Six out of seven projects were

completed and the production of a Good Practice Guide summarising the project findings in an accessible booklet format for practitioners (see <http://bit.ly/iDqiIW>).

Findings

What works with involuntary social work clients

The PRPs provided the data on what was found to be effective practice in work with involuntary service users. A number of themes emerged from this data, broadly reflecting themes identified in the wider literature and especially the Munro Review, whilst adding some local detail and substance to these.

Relationships built over time

One of the recurring themes for both projects was the importance of relationships, developed over time, in which trust can be built up gradually. Social workers and parents recounted narratives in which their relationship had begun with mutual suspicion and mistrust. Parents could be fearful, especially in respect of their perceptions of social workers' role in removing children and this had a major impact on relationships.

“Initially she was very mistrustful of us...thinking ‘how do I know you are going to follow through on these things?’ You know, ‘I don’t feel I can be honest with you ‘cos if I tell you the truth you are going to take my child away for ever’” (PRP1, social worker A)

“Every time a social worker phoned me, the first thing that’ll come out my mouth is you’re not taking my bairn (child) off me...I’m petrified that they’ll take my bairn off me

again because they done it when she was born... I can't believe anything that a Social Worker says" (PRP1, service user interview D, adult female)

This level of mutual mistrust existing between social workers and service users was perhaps summed up by one service user who concluded *"She didn't trust us and we didn't trust her and I think that was just how it was"* (PRP1, service user interview E, adult female). Building trust was repeatedly identified as essential for overcoming clients' fears, to enable engagement to take place. There was an inevitable 'dance of attunement' that needed to take place as the respective parties sought to test one another out in terms of their dependability. Both service users and social workers reported that, over time and with persistence, working relationships tended to improve.

Social workers said that trust could be built by very simple strategies. These revolved around making sure that any commitments made, often at a practical level, were upheld:

"Stick to your word. Say you will do something and do it because that builds trust and if you don't why would they trust us? If I say I'll help you with, I dunno, changing your baby, I'll show you how to do that and then I don't do it, how will they trust me?"

(PRP1, social worker A).

Nevertheless, interviewees identified a range of practical ways to build trusting relationships with service users. Many noted that honesty, on both sides of the relationship, was an essential feature. Being honest and upfront were seen as important, particularly around difficult issues where the client's reaction might be very negative. As trust developed, slowly, clients became increasingly able to express their views within social work processes:

“At the beginning I went along with what was said and agreed but as meetings progressed I was more able to voice opinion” (PRP2, service user interview)

In this context, worker continuity is especially important. Practitioners expressed frustration at the limitations on relational working imposed by heavy caseloads: these were felt to detract from the ability to interact directly; *“If we had a realistic caseload we could work at making a plan with our families because just now we sit in our office and do the plan and give it to families”* (PRP2, practitioner in “focus group”), although organisational requirements to meet bureaucratic demands may be as significant in this regard as the actual size of caseloads.

Managerially driven timescales could also act as a barrier to effective relationships, especially in situations that went beyond the normative:

“I have minor learning difficulties and I said that I will get there, you just need to give me time and work slowly with me...be patient with me instead of saying to me you need to do this by a certain date. Ever since then me and my social worker got more closer and worked together... because if you love someone [an abusive partner] it’s hard – you will do it [i.e. leave them], but you’ve just got to do it in your own pace in your own time instead of social workers having timescales on everything.” (PRP1, service user interview A, adult female).

Honesty and being upfront about concerns

Ruch et al (2010) note that social work relationships are not straightforward.

Specifically, they can involve conflict, although this can be worked with constructively:

“I think a lot of our clients feel we are out to get them and if you can turn that around and tell them ‘I want to be honest and open’ and the way I work is I say to them I am sometimes going to say things to you that you are not going to like sometimes but I have to be honest with you but if you listen we can try and find a way through it” (PRP1, social worker A)

A number of clients reported that they valued a ‘straight-talking’ approach:

“If there’s any concerns anybody has had she’ll tell ye. It’s just about being honest with one another, know what I mean, and with the old social worker she wisnie honest. She was honest either when we caught her oot wi’ something or being told by some other agency, or she would go behind your back an dae it” (PRP1, service user interview E, adult female)

While the accounts above extol the virtues of straight talking, this was not always service users’ experience:

“That’s what got me, the snoopin’ and the sneakiness and I felt as if they were trying to chase us into a hole and we couldnie get oot it and it was quite horrible, eh. It was as if they were trying to catch us out” (PRP1, service user interview E, adult female).

“They said one thing to use, came out with a different thing at the [Children’s Hearing] Panels” (PRP1, service user interview D, adult female).

Building engagement into the relationship: listening, valuing and advocacy

It is widely recognized that good social work practice with families necessarily includes taking some account of their members’ views, beliefs and wishes (Cree and Davis, 2007). Hernandez et al (2010) argue that user involvement is best integrated into everyday social care practices, rather than being added on as something separate. Our

data illuminate some of the ways in which user engagement can be built into the basic routines of doing social work.

Listening, and allowing clients to express their views and experiences, was seen as important. In some cases, considerable persistence and investment of time and energy was required on the part of social workers:

“One of the key ways that worked was giving them the opportunity to tell their story as they saw it...I started my involvement with them by saying I have read what there is to read but I would be interested to hear what your story is, and they both got the opportunity – which was difficult because...they do talk and interrupt over each other constantly – and it was quite difficult to get them to keep silent while the other one...so together as a couple and as two separate individuals they told me their stories and they told me their hopes, and their aspirations for themselves and for their children and for their relationship and what they wanted for their future, so that started a process of some change.” (PRP1, social worker E)

Several respondents commented on the importance of valuing what is positive in service users' behaviours, as well as risk factors and concerns. For some clients, the negative focus of social work had made engagement difficult:

“[Our previous social worker] didn't know how to deal with positive things. She was all happy to jump on us when we done stuff wrong but when we done stuff right she never commented on it, she never said nothing. It was always the bad things that she totally enjoyed.” (adult female service user)

Advocacy and helping clients to fight for their rights were also noted as helpful for building relationships. This resonates with previous research on service user

involvement in social work (Cooper et al, 2003). One social worker identified a turning point in her relationship when a mother witnessed the worker speaking in her defense in a professional meeting. The mother saw that the worker “*was prepared to go that extra wee bit for her*” (PRP1, social worker B), and this helped to improve the relationship.

What works in knowledge exchange

Our findings about what works in the KE process are based on data gathered over the course of the different stages of the project. Seminars and training events were evaluated using questionnaires to attendees. Flipcharts from group discussions were reviewed and written up. Project staff also made notes of their observations from meetings and events. Contribution analysis, a method for exploring the extent to which a particular programme of activity has contributed to observed changes, taking into account other influencing factors (Mayne, 2008) was carried out to assess impacts. As local authority social work is a highly complex and politicised field, we employed contribution analysis anticipating that a range of contextual factors might help or hinder impact. Following Mayne’s (2008) framework, a theory of change was developed in consultation with the practitioner-researchers. A model of the results chain was produced, and evidence collected using two methods:

Those who attended the first knowledge-sharing seminar were given a card and asked to write down up to three actions they hoped to take over the course of the project, along with their email address. In total 26 cards were filled in. Towards the end of the project, each person was emailed and asked, in relation to their proposed actions, how much progress they thought they had made and what had helped or hindered them in making progress. We received 12 responses (response rate = 46%), of which seven

were from people who had been involved with the PRPs. In terms of quantity of information, those who had been involved with the PRPs generally gave longer, more detailed answers.

The action card responses reinforced an emerging impression that the PRPs were likely to give us the best chance of significant impacts. We therefore invited all the practitioners who had completed PRPs to a meeting three months after the projects had ended. We asked each of them to come prepared to speak about at least one impact from their project. Five practitioners attended, representing four out of the six completed projects. The project team chaired the meeting, allowing each practitioner to report and making time for group discussion. The session was audio recorded, with practitioners' consent. Notes were written on the recording, including transcription of key quotes. A number of themes emerged, casting light on the knowledge exchange process.

Changes to personal practice

Practitioners spoke about impacts on their own practice, which might suggest that the experience of being involved in practitioner research gave rise to new insights into practice and in their relationships with clients. One gave an example of engaging with ideas of risk more positively:

“More knowledge about a subject and being able to apply that to your work and to think critically about it, and I’ve certainly seen a change in terms of my working with clients...being aware of some of the stuff that our research was about in terms of supporting people to take risks and not backing away from risk as something that you

must manage and completely get rid of. Having a broader understanding of that and being able to apply that to decision making and work with clients has been useful”(Practitioner 2).

Another reported a personal story about impact of her involvement in the project on her own practice:

“One wee story is having to work with someone who has [mental health problems] and do a child protection case conference report when she wouldn’t let me thorough the front door. So I ended up writing the report for her. And just said, ‘this is for you. It’s to explain what the issues are.’ ...and she read it through, and [it has had a positive effect]” (Practitioner 3).

When asked if she would have done this before being involved in the project she replied:

“I think I would write my reports more for the conference and professionals...It was a very lengthy report, but with good reason, I mean she’d been in screaming at me four times a week...[but the client] totally saw where I was coming from, and had read it, it was really thumbed. And she pointed out a spelling mistake [laughter], so it was examined. [The change in the family since then]...It’s huge”.

Creating a dialogue

In some cases, the PRPs demonstrated some impact in encouraging discussion in local authorities around the theme of engagement:

“It’s created a dialogue with practitioners in terms of front line managers and senior management around addressing cultures of engagement.” (Practitioner 1)

The same practitioner noted that: *“people are actually starting to engage in a debate around relationship based social work versus the culture of the last four or five years around systems and pushing bureaucratic models through, which were required at that time, but how do we get from there back to there so those two can come together in a more effective service. I think that’s a real challenge for people”*.

In another authority the practitioner researcher was asked to speak about the project to the local practitioner forum:

“So this is me presenting the report and the findings and discussing it with other social workers And that will be useful, and it will be interesting just to have it as a theme for the morning that we discuss...” (Practitioner 2).

While some opportunities for dialogue were planned, there could also be a serendipitous aspect to how they emerged. One practitioner spoke about the benefit of finding a ‘champion’ for the PRP in the form of the chief social work officer (CSO). Due to a change of job, they now share a building:

“For me it’s what we talk about all the time, it’s about relationships...if I’d still been sitting as a front line team leader, I wouldn’t have been in the same building, I wouldn’t have been sharing a coffee machine, I wouldn’t be doing all these things that allow relationships to form” (Practitioner 1).

In this case, the CSO saw the PRP report as a way to stimulate debate about relationship-based social work and, Practitioner 1 said, has *“really pushed that, as opening that out to be a legitimate discussion to have.”*

Human geographies, which in the above instance acted to stimulate debate around an idea, could also have a less positive effect. Practitioner 2, by contrast had difficulty

getting his messages further up the hierarchy. He said that as a front line practitioner he has no personal relationships with senior staff. He said it was also partly due to senior people who approved the project having moved on. This means the high level buy-in isn't there, and he isn't in a good position to broker this:

Again, one respondent said "it's about relationships and me being, not at the bottom of the food chain, but, y'know, direct front-line practice, located miles away, physically, from where those [senior management] people are, I don't really know them in the way I perhaps would have known the last ones. But even if I hadn't known them so well, at least they would have still had some residual awareness of the project" (Practitioner 2).

Instead, he is working from the bottom up. He has approached a team leader with a view to bringing his report to a wider audience and he has passed it on to someone else. This is a slow process – he has to wait for people to get back to him and can't try alternative routes simultaneously as this might be seen as bypassing people:

Working with local authority cultures

Local authority cultures are characterised as a hierarchical, focusing on "*internal stability and control, and rules and procedures over flexible, innovative initiatives that are market focused*" (Iriss, 2012: **page no?**). They tend to be less open to taking risks and trying out new ways of working. It was apparent in discussion with practitioners that cultures were premised upon such assumptions of rationality, whereby knowledge might be systematically brought to bear upon practice. Practitioner 2 said he thought there was interest from managers in hearing about research but went on to suggest that, within managerial cultures, they misunderstood KE as an event rather than a process. He felt that managers wanted clear 'messages from research', that they might then straightforwardly implement into practice, rather than viewing exchange as an ongoing

work in progress, to which participants were being asked to contribute in order to 'grow' that knowledge.

The actual examples of how knowledge did get into practice were far less linear and more circuitous than this:

"It's what gets through people's radars isn't it, and while it might be important to me, it might not be important to my team mate because they might be overwhelmed by other things and doing other things and working both ends. I did send out my project [report] to a number of people, and barely anybody read it. And then reminded the higher management, twice, that he'd agreed to send it out, and when he did, then everybody started talking about it...more people read it and more people discussed it and more people commented on it. But then also people said that they read it because my name was on it – having come from higher management – because it was somebody who was familiar"

There were several references throughout to impact occurring through a gradual, cumulative "drip drip" process, and this having the most impact in the long term.

In terms of wider impacts, Practitioner 3 has circulated the report to her colleagues and had asked for feedback:

"I did go round asking people did it make a difference. And it was interesting because the team leaders said, 'erm, well yeah I read it, didn't make any difference' [laughter]. But the practitioners are saying it's the drip drip thing that keeps them motivated every day, and it made a big difference to them...and I know it's probably going to go further 'cos there's going to be an article on the [council's] intranet about it."

There was some more general discussion about managerialism and how much of what has come from this project highlights the failings of that approach, and what might be done about that:

“One of the frustrations for me is that all this project’s done is reaffirm basic social work values...we need to get a head of steam on this because people aren’t telling us anything new, they [social workers] know they want to spend more time with families, they know they want people to explain what’s going on, they know they want to have families reflect, they know they want supervision in a psychodynamic way. They’re telling us all that stuff...but in terms of how you influence decision makers, they continue to ignore that because of the pressure of performance management”

(Practitioner 1).

Discussion

What is apparent both in the process of effective direct work with involuntary clients, and in that of knowledge exchange and mobilisation, is that neither is particularly amenable to technical/rational or linear understandings of cause and effect. The concept of emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1995) is emerging as an analytic device to understand social work processes (Ingram, 2012). While acknowledging the limitations of the conceptual stability of this concept, Ingram nevertheless identifies some of its key ideas around personality, intelligence and emotion as helpful in illuminating social work practice. First and foremost, the concept of emotional intelligence suggests that social workers need to engage with the emotional and relational rather than the purely procedural and instrumental dimensions of the task. Taking this as a starting point we offer some tentative insights into some of the common themes to emerge from both how social workers engage with involuntary clients, and how local authorities and academics

might work together in bringing knowledge into practice. These themes include: an exploration of the nature of knowledge; an overview of the more practical strategies and tactics emerging from the work; the importance and complexity of relationships, reflexivity and emotions within the work; and finally, the role of serendipity in influencing the process and outcomes of social work and the exchange of knowledge.

The nature of knowledge

Our findings ask questions of positivist conceptions of knowledge and of linear conceptions of knowledge exchange. Bondi et al (2011) argue that technically rational forms of knowledge are problematic in ‘people professions’. Askeland and Payne **(date: page no?)** note, “*the creation and use of knowledge within social work is a social process, constructed in localized contexts by those involved in professional practice*”. Nevo and Slonim-Nevo (2011), moreover, identify social work as an explicitly value-laden profession, in which practitioners’ judgments and interpretations play an essential role.

A particular challenge for social work practice in a context of austerity – and one that is picked up by social workers interviewed within the PRPs– is one of time. Eraut (2004) identifies that shortage of time and crowded contexts can lead people towards reactive responses. In social work, time pressures are compounded by managerial targets and demands, which lead to process driven and reactive practices. In that sense, there is merit in seeking ways through which practitioners might better draw on different understandings of knowledge to help them adopt more considered approaches in their practice. It is likely that a sense that knowledge that is credible, useful and which

‘speaks to’ practice may be more important to practitioners than the methodological rigour that is important to academics.

Strategy and tactics

Both client engagement and KE are commonly identified as ‘good things’. However, how these are translated to everyday practice is not straightforward. De Certeau (1984) differentiates between strategy and tactics in the practices of everyday life. Strategy, in the context of our study, might be identified as the abstract and ill-defined meta-narratives of client engagement and KE. Tactics, on the other hand, take advantage of ‘opportunities’ and “*must vigilantly make use of the cracks that particular conjunctions open*” (De Certeau, 1984: 37). It is the tactics of client engagement for instance, rather than the strategy set out by government, that are apparent in the everyday practices and interactions of social workers and their clients (Smith et al, 2011). The vagaries of the KE process might similarly be better considered at the level of tactics rather than strategy.

Hennessey’s (2011) work on relationally based social work seems to give weight to such an analysis. He argues:

“As you read [this] book you will find relatively few explicit references to anti-oppressive and anti-discriminatory practice, or to principles such as equality, worth, human rights and dignity...The reason for this is that, though these principles and attitudes are enshrined in law and protocol, they can, in the final analysis, only ever be expressed meaningfully in human relationships. In other words, it is only relationships

that can move them beyond being an idea in print and turn them into an experienced reality” (Hennessey, 2011: 3).

Relationships, Reflexivity and Emotion

As with the findings of the PRPs in respect of what worked in engaging with involuntary service users the importance of relationships, built through face-to-face contact between academics and practitioners, were essential for effective knowledge exchange. The face-to-face nature of such relationships was vital. Electronic means of communication did not prove particularly effective due to the e-mail overload that social workers experience, and the role of local authority firewalls in restricting the use of the Internet. A project wiki, set up in the project’s early stages, was swiftly abandoned when it became clear that most practitioners were unable to access it from their office computers.

Relationships between practitioners (e.g. between managers and front-line staff) are also crucial. There is a growing recognition of the role of interpersonal relationships and factors such as trust in enabling knowledge exchange (Bowen et al, 2005). Nutley et al (2007) suggest that:

“personal contact...seems to be the most important route for research to enter policy and practice. This suggests that research use may above all be a social process, involving interaction among individuals and the joint (re)construction of research evidence through ongoing debate, interplay and exchange” (Nutley et al, 2007: 88-89).

The identification of the importance of relationships and of more diffuse understandings of knowledge mobilisation might suggest the need for a reflexive quality from both

social workers and researchers. There has been a discernible ‘reflexive turn’ in the social sciences, which challenges positivist assumptions of the researcher adopting a view from nowhere in order to unearth neutral ‘facts’. Rather, all researchers “*speak from a particular place, out of a particular experience*” (Hall, 1992: 258). This ‘positionality’, inevitably, influences the nature of any research opportunities that might present themselves, and the nature of any data that is generated through the research process. In this case, the positioning of one of the Principal Investigators as an ‘insider’, an experienced social worker with extensive local connections and relationships and generally seen as ‘credible’, facilitated access to individuals and networks and oiled processes, thus creating spaces for the generation of data.

Positionality, however, is only one factor to be taken into account in any consideration of the research process. Moser (2008) identifies the importance of personality in influencing the research process and product. She notes in respect of her own research “*the initial respect I could command based on my various positions soon gave way to a respect I had to earn based on aspects of my personality*” (2008: 385). Moser identifies how emotional intelligence and an individual’s personality can affect the research process and outcomes. The research fellow on this project was not a social worker but developed credibility through trust built on an evident understanding of the social work role, consistent communication, accessibility and reliability.

Timeliness

The theme of working with involuntary clients, and its corollary of building effective relationships, struck a chord with practitioners and indeed within wider debates in social work. The project took place at the same time as Eileen Munro was commissioned to

report on child protection social work. In that sense, our results proved convenient and uncontentious to the managers who were struggling to consider the implications of the Munro for their own organisations. More by accident than by design, our project went with the grain of current policy in engaging in debates about the dominance of compliance and procedure, and the shift towards more relationally-based practice. This reinforces arguments in the KE literature about the importance of timing in getting messages into organisations (Nutley, 2009).

There was also an element of the KE process that allowed participants to re-engage with the value base of social work, as one of the respondents acknowledged in the quote cited earlier, about the project reaffirming basic social work values. In this sense, practitioner research, appropriately supported by KE activity, might perform a role in “*keeping the system honest*” (Nutley, 2009: **page no?**).

Conclusion

Our knowledge exchange project addressed two current concerns in the public services. In relation to social work, it picked up on policy imperatives to engage with the users of social services. At another level it sought to provide insights into how knowledge might be mobilised within local authorities. In both cases, managerial cultures and assumptions can act to reduce such imperatives to ‘just do it’ injunctions. What is apparent from our research is that neither domain is amenable to such linear or instrumental approaches. Similar dynamics and processes are evident in social work with involuntary clients and in KE with local authorities. At the heart of both is the quality of relationships established. This suggests that both effective social work and effective KE require that attention is directed towards the ‘softer’, more intuitive and

relational aspects of these two areas of practice, rather than towards hierarchical and instrumental means of creating change.

This requires recognizing how local authorities operate – not only in their explicit hierarchies, but also in their more hidden messy relationships, contingencies and accidental alignments – and then working out how to align effectively with that. The parallel here would be with client cultures, recognizing that involuntary clients may have different routines, values, habits and expectations to social workers, and taking that into account – hence the need for flexibility on timescales, clear communication and ongoing dialogue.

References

- Alexanderson, K., Beijer, E., Bengtsson, S., Hyvönen, U., Karlsson, P.-Å. and Nyman, M. (2009) Producing and consuming knowledge in social work practice: research and development activities in a Swedish context, *Evidence & Policy*, 5(2), 127-139.
- Antonacopoulou, E. P. (2010) Beyond co-production: practice-relevant scholarship as a foundation for delivering impact through powerful ideas, *Public Money & Management*, 30(4), 219-226.
- Armstrong, F. and Alsop, A. (2010) Debate: Co-production can contribute to research impact in the social sciences, *Public Money & Management*, 30(4), 208-210.
- Askeland, G. A. and Payne, M. (2001) What is Valid Knowledge for Social Workers?, *Social Work in Europe*, 8(3), 13-23.
- Beck, U. (1992) *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity* (New Delhi, Sage).
- Beresford, P. (2000) 'Service users' knowledges and social work theory: Conflict or collaboration?, *British Journal of Social Work*, 30(4), 489-503.
- Beresford, P. (2002) User involvement in research and evaluation: Liberation or regulation?, *Social Policy and Society*, 1(2), 95-105.
- Beresford, P. (2005) "Service user": Regressive or liberatory terminology?, *Disability & Society*, 20(4), 469-477.
- Beresford, P. and Croft, S. (2001) 'Service users' knowledges and the social construction of social work', *Journal of Social Work*, 1(3), 295-316.
- Beresford, P., Croft, S. and Adshead, L. (2008) "We don't see her as a social worker": A service user case study of the importance of the social worker's relationship and

Humanity, *British Journal of Social Work*, 38(7), 1388-1407.

Boaz, A., Fitzpatrick, S. and Shaw, B. (2008) *Assessing the impact of research on policy: A review of the literature for a project on bridging research and policy through outcome evaluation* (London, Kings College London and Policy Studies Institute).

Bondi, L. Carr, D. Clark, C. and Clegg, C. (2011) *Towards Professional Wisdom: Practical Deliberation in the People Professions* (Farnham, Ashgate).

Bowen, S., Martens, P. and The Need to Know Team. (2005) Demystifying knowledge translation: learning from the community, *Journal of Health Services Research and Policy*, 10(4), 203-211.

Cooper, A., Hetherington, R. and Katz, I. (2003) *The Risk Factor: Making the child protection system work for children* (London, DEMOS).

Cree, V. E. and Myers, S. (2008) *Social Work: Making a Difference* (Bristol, The Policy Press).

Cunningham, W. S. (2008) Voices from the field. Practitioner reactions to collaborative research initiatives, *Action Research*, 6(4), 373-390.

Davies, H. T. O., Nutley, S. and Smith, P. (2000) *What works? Evidence-based policy and practice in public services* (Bristol, The Policy Press).

Department of Health. (1995) *Child Protection: Messages from Research* (London, Department of Health).

De Certeau, M. (1984) *The Practice of Everyday Life*, translated by Rendall Steven (Berkeley, University of California Press).

Eraut M. (2004) Informal learning in the workplace, *Studies in Continuing Education*, 26(2), 247-273.

- Gallagher, M. Smith, M. Wosu, H. Stewart, J. Hunter, S. Cree, V.E. and Wilkinson, H. (2011) 'Engaging with families in child protection: lessons from practitioner research in Scotland, *Child Welfare*, 90(4), 117-34.
- Hall, S. (1992) New Ethnicities in: J Donald and A Rattansi (Eds) *Race, Culture and Difference* (London, Sage).
- Hennessey, R. (2011) *Relationship Skills in Social Work* (London, Sage).
- Hernandez, L., Robson, P. and Sampson, A. (2010) Towards integrated participation: Involving seldom heard users of social care services, *British Journal of Social Work*, 40(3), 714-736.
- Houston, S. and Griffiths, H. (2000) Reflections on Risk: Is It Time for a Shift in Paradigms?, *Child and Family Social Work*, 5(1), 1-10.
- Ingram, R. (2012) Locating emotional intelligence at the heart of social work practice. *British Journal of Social Work*, In Press, available online at: <http://bjsw.oxfordjournals.org/cgi/content/full/bcs029?ijkey=rPopIiT4r5XCFiK&keytype=ref> (accessed 26 October 2012).
- Iriss. (2012) *Culture change in the public sector, Iriss Insights no 17* (Glasgow, Iriss).
- Lonne, B., Parton, N., Thomson, J. and Harries, M. (2008) *Reforming Child Protection* (London, Sage).
- Lunt, N., Shaw, I. and Fouche, C. (2010) Practitioner research: collaboration and knowledge production, *Public Money & Management*, 30(4): 235-242.
- Martin, S. (2010) Co-production of social research: strategies for engaged scholarship, *Public Money & Management*, 30(4): 211-218.

- Mayne, J. (2008) *ILAC Brief 16: Contribution analysis: An approach to exploring cause and effect* (Rome: Institutional Learning and Change Initiative).
- Mitchell, F., Lunt, N. and Shaw, I. (2010) Practitioner research in social work: a knowledge review, *Evidence & Policy: A Journal of Research, Debate and Practice*, 6 (1): 7-31.
- Mitchell, P., Pirkis, J., Hall, J. and Haas, M. (2009) Partnerships for knowledge exchange in health services research, policy and practice, *Journal of Health Services Research and Policy*, 14(2): 104-111.
- Moser, S (2008) Personality: a new positionality?, *Area*, 40(3), 383-392.
- Munro, E. (2001) Empowering looked-after children, *Child & Family Social Work*, 6(2), 129-37.
- Munro, E. (2011) *The Munro Review of Child Protection: Final Report: A Child-Centred System* (London, Department of Education).
- Nevo, I. and Slonim-Nevo, V. (2011) The Myth of Evidence-Based Practice: Towards Evidence-Informed Practice, *British Journal of Social Work*, 41(6), 1176-1197.
- Newman, J. and Nutley, S. (2003) Transforming the probation service: 'what works', organisational change and professional identity, *Policy and Politics*, 31(4): 547-563.
- Nutley, S. (2009) *Understanding and improving research use in social services: What Works*, IRISS Seminar, University of Edinburgh.
- Nutley, S. M., Walter, I. and Davies, H. T. O. (2007) *Using evidence: how research can inform public services* (Bristol, The Policy Press).

- Nutley, S.M., Walter, I. and Davies, H.T.O. (2003) From Knowing to Doing: A Framework for Understanding the Evidence-into-Practice Agenda, *Evaluation*, 9, 125-148
- Nutley, S.M., Walter, I. and Davies, H.T.O. (2009) Promoting Evidence-based Practice: Models and Mechanisms from Cross-Sector Review, *Research on Social Work Practice*, 19: 552-559.
- Nutley, S. M., Walter, I. and Davies, H. T. O. (2007) *Using Evidence: How Research Can Inform Public Services* (Bristol, The Policy Press).
- Orr, K. and Bennett, M. (2010) Editorial, *Public Money & Management*, 30(4): 199-203.
- Parton, N. (1985) *The Politics of Child Abuse* (Basingstoke, Macmillan).
- Parton, N. (1999) Reconfiguring child welfare practices: risk, advanced liberalism and the governance of freedom. In A.S. Chambon, A. Irving and L. Epstein (Eds) *Reading Foucault for social work* (New York, Columbia University Press).
- Petch, A. (2009) Guest editorial, *Evidence & Policy*, 5(2), 117-126.
- Postle, K. and Beresford, P. (2007) Capacity building and the reconception of political participation: A role for social care workers?, *British Journal of Social Work*, 37(1), 143–58.
- Scottish Executive (2006) *Changing Lives: Report of the 21st Century Social Work Review* (Edinburgh, Scottish Executive).
- Scottish Office (1999) *Aiming for Excellence: A White Paper: Modernising Social Work Services in Scotland* (Edinburgh, The Stationery Office).

Shaw, I. and Lunt, N. (2011) Navigating Practitioner Research, *British Journal of Social Work*, 22: 1-18.

Simmons, R. and Birchall, J. (2005) A joined-up approach to user participation in public services: Strengthening the “participation chain”, *Social Policy & Administration*, 39(3), 260-83.

Smith, M. Gallagher, M. Wosu, H. Stewart, J. Cree, V.E. Hunter, Evans, S.

Montgomery, C. Holiday, S. and Wilkinson, H. (2011) Engaging with Involuntary Service Users in Social Work: Findings from a Knowledge Exchange Project, *British Journal of Social Work*, in press.

Tsui M and Cheung, F.C.H (2004) Gone with the Wind: The Impacts of Managerialism on Human Services, *British Journal of Social Work*, 34, 437-442.

Walker, D. (2010) Debate: Do academics know better or merely different?, *Public Money & Management*, 30(4): 204-206.

Walter, I., Davies, H. and Nutley, S.(2003) Increasing research impact through partnerships: evidence from outside health care, *Journal of Health Services Research and Policy*, 8, 58–61.

Walter, I., Nutley, S., Percy-Smith, J., McNeish, D. and Frost, S. (2004) *Knowledge Review: Improving the use of research in social care practice* (London: Social Care Institute for Excellence).

Webb, S. (2006) *Social Work in a Risk Society: Social and Political Perspectives* (Basingstoke, Palgrave).