

Dilemmas in doing insider research in professional education

Caroline Humphrey

This article explores the dilemmas I encountered when researching social work education in England as an insider researcher who was simultaneously employed as an educator in the host institution. This was an ethnographic project deploying multiple methods and generating rich case study material which informed the student textbook *Becoming a Social Worker* (Humphrey, 2011). But a series of dilemmas materialized over the four-year period of the project. First, ethical dilemmas emerged around informed consent and confidentiality when conducting surveys of students and reading their portfolios. Second, professional dilemmas stemmed from the ways in which my roles as a researcher, academic tutor, social worker and former practice educator converged and collided. Third, political dilemmas pertained to the potential for the project to crystallize and convey conflicts among stakeholders in the university and community. Since the majority of research in social work education is conducted by insiders, we have a vital interest in making sense of such complexity.

Keywords Ethics, ethnography, insider research, politics, professional pedagogy

Introduction

Insider research may be defined as research conducted by people who are already members of the organization or community they are seeking to investigate as a result of education, employment, social networks or political engagements (Coghlan and Brannick, 2005). It is often sensitive research insofar as it is more likely to uncover sensitive material about stakeholders and sites, and if this poses symbolic or material threats to participants or institutions then it can jeopardize the project (Lee, 1993). Researching professional education from a position of an insider educator-researcher may be a particularly sensitive enterprise given that the audiences for such research can include prospective and current students, colleagues in one's home territory and elsewhere, and regulators in professional bodies and government circles.

There is a long history of insider research in educational establishments ranging from schools to universities, and an increasing appreciation of the personal, professional and political conundrums which insider researchers have to navigate (Noffke, 2009). However, there has been little exposition of the specific dilemmas of doing insider research in professional education. A notable exception is provided by Ryan (1996) in his discussion of the well-known Australian study by Fook et al. (2000) which followed the trajectories of a whole cohort of social work students over a five-year period. He acknowledges the potential role-conflicts when educators approach their own students with a request to participate in research, since the request may be perceived by students as a requirement when made by a figure of authority in their own institution (and in fact none of the students declined to participate in this study).

A perusal of the literature indicates that there are divergent views about the ethics of insider research. On the one hand, external stakeholders can be conscientious in highlighting the risks. Moules et al. (2004) report that their proposal to research student learning in a health care module was initially turned down by a National Health Service ethics committee on the grounds that one of the researchers was a nurse educator in the institution, even though she was not part of the module team. On the other hand, insider educator-researchers can become desensitized to potential role-conflicts. Some medical educators have argued that research ethics around choosing and consenting to participate should be bracketed on the twin grounds

that such research is indispensable to professional pedagogy and students do not constitute vulnerable populations (Ten Cate, 2009).

An international review of social work education research highlighted the ubiquity of insider research (Barretti, 2004). So why is there a paucity of accounts of personal, professional, ethical or political dilemmas in doing insider research in the literature? There are at least three possible answers. First, researchers may not have encountered any noteworthy dilemmas – the prevalence of small-scale studies lends support to this notion, given that convoluted entanglements are associated with longitudinal ethnographic projects. Second, researchers may not be sufficiently reflexive about such dilemmas – if we succumb to the temptation to ‘naturalize’ research in our own home territory, or if we are already convinced about its merits, we may remain oblivious to the risks. Third, researchers may have relevant experiences and reflections – but they may have been unable or unwilling to publish on matters which could be damaging to themselves or their institutions.

This is not to suggest that social work researchers have neglected ethico-political issues in general; on the contrary, such issues have been carefully explored in relation to service user and carer groups (e.g. Shaw et al., 2010). But it is time to turn our gaze inwards and ponder on some of the issues at stake in researching students and colleagues in our home territories. In this article I shall sketch out the contours of my own study and then provide examples of some of the ethical, professional and political dilemmas which transpired. The concluding comments will assist future researchers to build supports and safeguards into insider research projects.

The study of students and their educators

The aim of my study was to explore the personal, professional and political interfaces in becoming a social worker in a manner which would be helpful to future generations of students and educators, on the premise that processes of becoming are at the heart of professional socialization and yet have frequently been overlooked in studies of professional education (cf. Barretti, 2004; Dall’Alba, 2009). In other words, students do not simply amass new knowledge or apply new skills, but rather they start to internalize new ways of being, doing, feeling, perceiving and thinking, and during this personal-professional evolution their sense of self and world-view can be reconfigured.

Ethical approval was granted by the relevant university committee for an ethnographic project which would mobilize multiple methods of data collection in relation to students and educators, and which would hinge upon my insider status. I needed to be a sufficiently trustworthy figure in the eyes of students for the duration of their training if I was to engage them in the kind of dialogues which would open a window onto the hidden curriculum and practicum and their own hidden depths. I also believed that educators would be keen to participate in a project conducted by an insider whose work was more likely to have practical benefits in the local context. Whilst it was acknowledged that ethnographic projects can stumble across unanticipated obstacles, it was assumed by all that an experienced ethnographer would rise to such challenges.

The project unfolded over a four year period (2004–2008). In Year 1 I undertook pilot studies with students across all three years of a BA in Social Work programme. These were intended to test out my own methods of engaging with students and to check out what students themselves at different stages of the programme regarded as the most salient themes. During this pilot phase I also offered briefing sessions to practice educators in the community, and this later resulted in 30 educators being interviewed as individuals, dyads or triads.

Year 2 of the project signalled the start of the main study. I met with a whole cohort of 80 students in the first week of their BA in Social Work programme and explained the project so that they were aware of my dual role as an educator-researcher, the junctures where the research would intersect with their programme, and my aspiration to publish works which would be beneficial to future generations of students and their educators. In addition, I administered a survey questionnaire which was designed to find out about their biographical trajectories into the profession as well as their starting-points in terms of conceptions of social work and initial career preferences.

Themes around practice learning predominated in Years 3 and 4 of the project. In Year 3 I conducted focus groups with students on their initial placement in order to gather material on the transition from academic to practice learning. Then I attended plenary sessions at the end of the initial placement in order to give feedback to all students about the progress of the project to date, which included a summary of themes emerging from the initial survey. I also invited students to volunteer themselves for an interview about their journey into social work and their experiences of professional pedagogy and practice,

and to volunteer their portfolios for a research reading. Over 50 percent of students requested an individual interview, and over 75 percent of students volunteered their portfolios, which massively outstripped my capacity as a solo researcher. My sampling of students and portfolios was based upon the principles that I needed to gather data on students exhibiting a range of profiles, and portfolio material from a variety of agencies. This exercise was repeated in Year 4 of the project after the final placement, and again I was overwhelmed with the number of students who offered themselves and/or their portfolios for the project. In total, 30 students were interviewed at different stages of their degree and 40 portfolios were read.

By the end, my ethnographic journal had become subdivided into different journals dealing with the twists and turns taken by an evolving methodology, specific controversial episodes, reflections upon my shifting roles and my experiences in everyday life as an academic tutor. These journals served a variety of purposes in enhancing my reflexivity, guiding my journey and processing my anxiety, and key themes have been distilled in this article, but the journals themselves reside outside of the official database of the project (cf. Humphrey, 2007).

Ethical dilemmas

Traditionally, the sphere of research ethics encompasses intrinsic deontological principles around our duty to respect the autonomy and privacy of our fellow human beings as well as extrinsic consequentialist principles around maximizing the benefits and minimizing the harms which flow from our research (Butler, 2002). Both sets of principles can be problematic in ethnographic projects given that the researcher is a member of the community and cannot remind people of their research remit at every encounter without disrupting the flow of everyday life, and given that such projects evolve in response to changing conditions, rendering the prediction of future consequences distinctly hazardous (Murphy and Dingwall, 2001). Seasoned ethnographers have challenged the applicability of formal codes of ethics in this territory, arguing that they can operate as a strait-jacket preventing flexible responses in the field (Hugman, 2010). What are the alternatives? Some have endorsed virtue ethics, enjoining us to trust the moral character and credentials of the researcher (cf. McBeath and Webb, 2002). This is far from satisfactory, given that some ethnographers have explicitly defended

interactional dishonesty as a way of surviving in the field (Punch, 1986: 71). Others have advocated relational ethics, pointing out that the ethnographer is or becomes a member of the community, with an intrinsic care for and connectedness to that community, which undergirds their commitments to both deontological and consequentialist principles (Christians, 2000). Whilst this may be true, it does not preclude conflicts of perspectives or interests between different members of the community. At the very least, researchers need an attunement to what Hugman (2010) dubs ‘moral pluralism’ i.e. an acknowledgement that all parties (researcher, participants and stakeholders) harbour distinct sets of rights and duties which may intersect in various ways – ranging from the harmonious to the antagonistic.

Here, the focus is on dilemmas around informed consent – a pivotal principle in all codes of ethics (e.g. Joint Universities Council Social Work Education Committee, 2002: Standard 10) – but related matters such as the confidentiality of stories and the anonymity of actors will also be addressed.

During the pilot studies, interviews with student volunteers illustrated that they did not understand the nature of a research interview. One student stated that she had simply been intrigued by what was entailed in a research interview, whilst another wanted to clarify career options with a member of staff, and a few responded to my open-ended approach by disclosing the personal trauma which had brought them into the profession in a manner which overstretched the research remit. This raised dilemmas for me as a researcher – if students did not understand the research brief, I could end up with data of limited relevance from people who had not given genuinely informed consent; and if those who volunteered for interviews had atypical profiles, I could end up with a very skewed version of becoming a social worker.

So in the main study, the plenary session with all students in their first week of the programme was intended to counteract these difficulties. It enabled me to explain the nature of my research for the sake of securing genuinely informed consent to future participation, and to administer a survey to all students in order to map out biographical profiles across the whole cohort as a baseline against which to check the representativeness of volunteers in subsequent years. Whilst both aims were laudable, they were in contradiction with one another, given that I was explaining the project to secure

informed consent to future involvement and simultaneously administering a survey with limited opportunities to opt out in the present. Students were told that they had choices in whether to answer the questions on the survey and whether to hand in the final product, but 100 percent of questionnaires were returned and over 90 percent contained detailed self-disclosures. This yielded important information which led to the development of a typology of routes into social work, where the 'service user' route of those who had suffered trauma in their own lives was indeed more prevalent than the 'personal carer' or 'citizen' routes. But my conscience was perturbed: How far were novices really able to exercise choices around self-disclosures when faced with an authority figure? So I decided to shelve the survey material, and in my published works I relied upon comparable accounts from interviews with student volunteers, whose profiles were indeed representative of the whole cohort.

An indirect dilemma around informed consent surfaced in subsequent years when interviewing students and reading portfolios in the aftermath of placements. This generated a lot of case study material around multi-agency working and the lives of service users which would be indispensable to the pedagogic aims of the project. However, informed consent for the use of these stories had been given by students, and not by managers or service users who would arguably have a legitimate interest in deciding whether or not such stories should reach the public domain. Of course it was not feasible to track down all relevant actors – who had already been anonymized by students in their speech and writing. Nevertheless, it begs the question: Whose story is being told here? Yes, they are stories about students' practice learning, but they are also stories about supervisors, colleagues, service users and carers, and some of the stories exposed significant failings in agencies and personal anguish in families. Would all the actors have consented to these stories being circulated, albeit in an anonymized form and for a defensible reason?

This permeability of boundaries between our own lives and those of others is an inevitable feature of qualitative research, and the teller of the tale as well as others implicated in the tale may be disconcerted at the end-product (Plummer, 2001). If these tales are publicized in ways which are unexpected or unwelcome, then the trust the teller of the tale had explicitly invested in the researcher, and the trust that others had implicitly accorded the teller of the tale, can be shattered. So an indirect dilemma around informed consent has ripple effects on other principles such as confidentiality and anonymity. In my own

study, the material collected for the research often pertained to matters which are treated as confidential to specific agencies and the people directly involved in the situation, such as supervision dialogues, service users' disabilities and interagency disputes. A thought-provoking question here is: Do qualitative researchers in the territories of education, health and social care routinely if inadvertently invite participants to breach agency-based norms around confidentiality? In my own end-product it is likely that some people in the stories told by students will be able to identify themselves and other actors – however anonymous these stories will appear to outsiders, it is impossible to anonymize in respect of insiders (Murphy and Dingwall, 2001). Conversely, erroneous deductive disclosures can be made, particularly when certain types of profiles and situations are widespread (Lee, 1993). So the decision to use real-life case studies in a textbook is simultaneously ground-breaking and risk-taking.

Professional dilemmas

Several conundrums are encapsulated within the phrase 'professional dilemmas' on account of the fact that I found myself simultaneously occupying a range of professional roles, i.e. as a researcher, academic tutor, social worker and former practice educator. Sometimes these roles could be creatively combined – after a research interview with a student who had explained their difficulty with a social work theory or practice scenario, I could offer advice as an academic tutor or social worker as an addendum to the research interview. Sometimes these roles clashed – occasionally I had reason to be concerned about the suitability of a student or an agency on the basis of my research, but when relevant issues were being discussed in official meetings, I was obliged to maintain confidentiality as a researcher, even at the expense of my convictions as an educator (cf. Baez, 2002). One of the most difficult things for an insider researcher is to be mindful of their primary role at any given time, and to compartmentalize every piece of information in accordance with whether it materialized from an explicit research event, an educational forum or an accidental encounter in everyday life, since such parameters can dictate what may or may not be done with the data (Coghlan and Brannick, 2005).

In this section, the focus is upon interviews with practice educators which were often punctuated by impasses, defences and silences. Essentially, I presumed that we would share the discourse of professional pedagogy and practice, thus generating a collegiate

conversation which would move back and forth between first-order descriptions and second-order analyses, with a built-in potential for co-constructing grounded theory, the mode of inductive analysis associated with ethnography (Charmaz and Mitchell, 2001). Instead, I was confronted with discursive disjunctures – the term ‘discourses’ pertains to both languages and practices (Rabinow, 1984), and whilst my interlocutors and I shared many of the practices of professional pedagogy, we did not always share the same language – or enjoy equality in our ease of access to it – so our ways of organizing knowledge and making sense of practice could be mismatched (cf. White, 2001).

This can be concretely examined with reference to three topics covered in all interviews – the teaching, learning and supervision of students; the integration of theory and practice; and the assessment of social work values.

Almost all of my interviewees had undertaken specialist training in practice education which examined models of supervision and the learning styles of students, but questions on such topics were often greeted with long silences followed by struggles to retrieve relevant-sounding words. In terms of Honey and Mumford’s (2000) learning styles, only one person had embedded the entire conceptual framework around activists, reflectors, theorists and pragmatists in her everyday practice, and most educators adopted a dichotomy of activists and reflectors which they applied intuitively to students. In terms of models of supervision, many educators did not retain even fragments of a framework, appealing instead to an eclecticism which was sometimes highly sophisticated and sometimes almost incoherent (cf. Payne, 2002). Eventually I abandoned this framing of the topics and sought concrete case examples about their experiences of working with students, which enabled me to construct a typology of models of supervision which was faithful to those practices.

Initially I persisted with attempts to find out how practice educators helped students to integrate theory and practice, in spite of my growing awareness that the word ‘theory’ itself triggered anxiety in my interlocutors. Here I was positioned as an outsider researcher, as an academic rather than as a social worker and former practice educator, particularly when interviews were conducted in my own office (which looks like a library). Many practice educators resorted to one of the following claims: ‘I don’t understand theories’; ‘I/we don’t use theories in our agency’; ‘We don’t need theories in social

work'. Although I experimented with alternative ways of framing these questions, notably by substituting the theory word with safer alternatives such as 'knowledge base', sometimes this only served to displace the problem elsewhere. This is not simply a local problem – practitioners are renowned for being theory-averse (Payne, 2002), and their theoretical orientations have often been subsumed within their personal or political preferences, so that the distinctive role of theory and its relationship to research as well as practice has been overlooked (Trevillion, 2008).

When I moved on to the topic of social work values, I was confident that this would restore my insider status and the collegiate rapport associated with it – and it did. But the research interviews continued to flounder, and the irony here was that my insiderhood itself foreclosed the space of dialogue. The most common refrain was that 'We all share the same social work values', as if this rendered attempts at defining or debating values redundant. Actually, further probing indicated that different practice educators meant different things by the notion of 'social work values' – ranging from empathic congruence to anti-oppressive politics and evidence-based practice – which in turn suggested that they were assessing students' values with reference to different criteria. But after long silences, several interviewees confessed that they were unable to identify any specific social work values, and they were perturbed by their inability to do so, since they knew deep down that they understood what they meant by social work values, and they deemed 'values' to be at the heart of practice. A few tried to remedy the situation after the interview by sending me lists of values which had been adopted by their agencies, but this circumnavigated the difficulty insofar as these lists had been created by service users and carers during consultation exercises hosted by the agencies. This vagueness of value-talk may also be symptomatic of the neglect of theory in social work – theory in the broader sense of philosophical orientations and analytical skills (Clarke, 2000).

There were a few highly articulate practice educators, but they were the exception rather than the rule. So I was left with the following conundrum: Had I lost my own grounding in social work and practice education – and if so, was I now competent to teach and research? Or had many practice educators lost their grounding in the language of their profession – and if so, how could they teach students and talk to researchers?

My subsequent processing of these interviews and transcripts led me to the following conclusions. The practice educators I interviewed would be regarded as experts by their colleagues and students – they volunteered for a research interview on account of their commitment to practice education, and these interviews contain evidence that they had a sound intuitive understanding of pedagogy and practice when discussing concrete case examples. But their knowledge was internalized at the level of the subconscious – they embodied and enacted it in everyday life, and although some of their intuitive understandings may have surpassed textbook knowledge, their practices had become detached from official labels, and their underlying theoretical frameworks had atrophied. This is in keeping with the conclusion reached by the Australian researchers Osmond and O'Connor (2004). On the one hand, this is precisely one of the central meanings of becoming a social worker i.e. that we are transformed from within so that we become the phenomenon in question, as epistemology is converted into ontology (Dall'Alba, 2009). Experts are the ideal exemplars of this process as they evolve templates from practice wisdom which come to supplant textbook formulae (Fook et al., 2000), and this professional craft knowledge is largely developed and transmitted outside of conscious awareness and articulation (Titchen and Ersser, 2001). On the other hand, becoming a social work educator should include the capacity to examine first-order practices with reference to second-order languages for the sake of students who are new to both, and who need to operate at the curriculum-practicum interface. For as long as 'practice wisdom' remains so opaque, it can be disparaged as 'common-sense' by outsiders (Jamrozick and Nocella, 1998: 56), and we still need compassionate but critical inquiry into practice wisdom in social work (Gould and Shaw, 2001).

Political dilemmas

Social science researchers regard the realm of the political as embracing the interpersonal politics of everyday life as well as institutional politics around resources and reputations (Lee, 1993; Punch, 1986). Codes of ethics typically include reference to political matters such as the desiderata of utilizing research findings in the service of social justice (Butler, 2002). Social work researchers should also be mindful of their professional commitments to anti-oppressive practice – ideally, the process of research would approximate to a form of co-inquiry, and the end-products would become resources for the education and empowerment of the relevant

social groups (Strier, 2007). My own project could be deemed relatively successful when measured against the canons of anti-oppressive practice insofar as students became more active stakeholders as the project progressed, and insofar as the end-product is designed to educate and empower future students, but it proved controversial in other respects.

During the pilot studies a couple of local authority managers contacted me to request an interview, having been notified about the project by practice educators. They were worried about deteriorating standards among students and newly qualified recruits, which they attributed to the widening of the admissions gates in higher education and an increased reliance upon the independent sector to secure placements for unprecedented numbers of students. Indeed, this convergence of factors was causing consternation to social work educators across England (Dillon, 2007; Doel et al., 2007). I felt it was my duty as an educator to relay these concerns to my own managers, which was in accordance with the expressed wishes of these interviewees. During the post-placement plenary sessions, some groups of students conveyed suspicions that they had been ‘guinea pigs’ in the new degree programmes, and that the quality of teaching and supervision had been impaired by the increase in cohort sizes. This was also fed back to my own managers with the collective consent of the students, and we did engage in some curricular restructuring as a result.

Such episodes sparked off wider fears about the trajectory and destiny of the project. For some managers, the question was whether an ethnography was metamorphosing into an action research project or a programme evaluation in a manner which exceeded its original remit? Ethnography has a built-in potential for boundary-crossings, as these projects evolve over time in response to changing circumstances, and the role(s) attributed to or adopted by the researcher may shift accordingly. From an ethnographer’s perspective, this is part of the territory rather than an anomaly, and the only question worth asking is whether or not boundary-crossings are justifiable under the circumstances? (Burke, 2007). From a manager’s perspective, this may be irrelevant – managers are more concerned about the impact of research upon the reputation of the institution, and evidence of dissent or discontent is an inauspicious sign on this front. Indeed, the potential conflict of interest between ethnographers and their employers in higher education has induced some insider researchers to terminate their research in order to retain

their employment (Adler and Adler, 1993), and others to delay all publications until they have found alternative employment (Mercer, 2007). Those who remain in the host institution typically exercise a strategic self-censorship in published works (Adler and Adler, 1993; Brannick and Coghlan, 2007), which casts doubt upon the feasibility of injunctions to publish research findings in full and without regard to any vested interests (Joint Universities Council Social Work Education Committee, 2002: Standard 14).

For some colleagues, the question was whether an ethnography which delved into the 'hidden' curriculum and practicum was tantamount to a form of undercover research or ethnographic espionage? (cf. Asselin, 2003; Simmons, 2007). From the perspective of an insider researcher, it is essential to cultivate a level of anthropological estrangement in order to go beyond the everyday understanding of the life-world of which s/he is a member, and this requires an attitude of curiosity and critical reflexivity in relation to the everyday (un)consciousness in which s/he participates (Maso, 2001). From the perspective of colleagues, this may be deeply disconcerting (Shaw, 2008). During routine interactions they may wonder: Why is s/he interested in this issue? How might these comments be interpreted? Could this event be recorded in an ethnographic journal?

Insider research can be characterized by a certain duplicity by virtue of the fact that the insider researcher has to hold together the two distinct roles of being an 'insider' and being a 'researcher', and to walk the tightrope which is constituted by the insider-outsider hyphen (Humphrey, 2007). Some stakeholders disclose difficulties to an insider researcher in order that these may be conveyed to managers – here, insider researchers have a vested interest in promoting positive changes in the institution and preserving their research project, but one or both of these goals can be blocked if managers start to construe the researcher and their project as the source of the problem. Some colleagues expect to see tangible fruits from a home-spun project – here, insider researchers may want to share their developing hypotheses, but they cannot afford to deconstruct common-sense and thereby disrupt collegiality to the point that they are no longer entrusted with the information and interactions which are vital to the further development of those hypotheses. So the double-consciousness of the insider who is now a researcher can be mirrored in the double-consciousness of other insiders who may wonder whether they are now objects of study for the researcher or even objects of scrutiny for other stakeholders.

Conclusion

Insider research is a growth industry in higher education and the caring professions across America, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and the UK as a result of the apparatus around institutional audits which also encourages evaluation research from within organizations, and the emergence of practitioner-researchers who conduct studies in their own hospitals, schools and social care agencies (Sikes and Potts, 2008). It is therefore incumbent upon insider researchers, along with their supervisors and staff on ethics committees, to become cognizant of potential risks in an effort to anticipate and avoid them, or ameliorate their effects. The aim is to become risk-aware rather than risk-averse, given that insider research can excavate rich data from the deep strata of our consciousness and communities, and given the impossibility and undesirability of eliminating risks.

The most risk-laden projects are solo insider ethnographies, particularly if conducted during a period of transition or turbulence, and the paucity of supports and safeguards for such researchers and their projects is lamentable (cf. Potts, 2008). Access to a consultant who commands credibility within the organization and/or profession is indispensable. Such a consultant could provide debriefing from difficult socio-emotional dynamics, challenging in the event of cultural immersion and advocacy in response to politically-charged criticism (Dickson-Swift et al., 2009). Even if the project is running smoothly, such consultancy may have a symbolic value in lending credibility to the project, since insider research tends to be accorded second-class status (Smyth and Holian, 2008). Access to a support network of researchers within and beyond the institution would also be advisable.

The alternative way of diluting risks is to design collaborative projects so that most if not all of the key players occupy an insider-outsider position – and this can also undo many of the ethical, political and professional knots considered in this article. On the ethical front, there is a trade-off between soliciting the voluntary participation of a minority of unrepresentative students and securing robust data from whole cohorts of students whose choice over participation is curtailed. This dilemma disappears when we construe qualitative research into teaching and learning as integral to the evaluation of a new programme, thus mandating the participation of all students and educators, an approach which has recently been applied to social work education by Vitali (2010). On the political

front, the predicament around boundary-blurring in ethnography is similarly dissipated if we reconfigure it as a form of co-operative inquiry with a built-in potential for action research, so that educators, students and service users collaborate in gathering and analysing the data, and in the planning and actioning of reforms in their local site (Reason and Bradbury, 2001). On the professional front, the gulf between academics and practitioners has thwarted the development of a theoretically-informed understanding of the intricacies of practice wisdom and practice education. Here, the practitioner-researcher is the archetypal insider researcher, so we need to dismantle the resistance of practitioners to research (cf. McCrystal and Wilson, 2009) as well as the barriers preventing academics from returning to practice and practice education, so that we can become co-inquirers into our own communities of practice.

Unfortunately, the dynamics of the insider-outsider position itself can be occluded in team projects where everyone inhabits this positionality. We owe our understanding of traversing the insider-outsider tightrope to solo ethnographers who experienced vulnerability in the depths of their being for several years of their lives. They felt obliged to make sense of the aporetic nature of personal, professional and political knots in the abyss of solitary confinement, and unanticipated happenings or unwanted findings could bring the research to an abrupt terminus, or could leave the researchers facing social exclusion from the communities which had hitherto grounded their sense of identity and security (e.g. Humphrey, 2007; Potts, 2008). If this is the incubator which gives birth to certain kinds of insights about the nature of qualitative inquiry itself, then collaborative projects may ironically create too many 'supports' and too much 'safety' to sustain such reflexivity, although teams might by the same token foster alternative kinds of reflexivity in respect of other issues.

How can reflexivity in respect of the insider-outsider role be nurtured? We return full circle to social work education. Students who are inquiring into themselves, their profession, their practice and their organizations are ipso facto in the insider-outsider position, and at the ideal stage of their careers to contemplate that positionality, since they are not yet afflicted by acculturation. Educators can encourage students to consider themselves as practitioner-researchers-in-the-making, explaining how this juxtaposition of insiderhood and outsiderhood can foster the development of theoretical understandings of practice, evaluation research into

practice and critical perspectives on the contexts of practice (cf. McCrystal and Wilson, 2009). This presupposes that educators have acquired the art of appreciating and activating the insider-outsider hyphen. But the meaning of 'becoming a social worker' is then transfigured – and this calls for further (insider) research.

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