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Constructing Social Work

Stories of the Developing Social Worker

└ Kwong Wai Man

A dissertation submitted to the University of Bristol in accordance with the
requirements of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
in the Faculty of Social Sciences

Centre of Professional Studies
School of Policy Studies

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Abstract

This is a narrative inquiry of social workers' account of their professional learning and change beginning from the time they started their social work career. From the outset, it was posited that beginners would find that the social work they learned in initial social work education is different from the social work in the real world. Given this, every beginner will pursue professional learning on the job, as they become an experienced practitioner over time. What is the process like? How do changes come about? What are the changes? A group of family service workers narrated their professional life at two points in time over a span of two to four years. In addition, a fresh graduate working in a drug rehabilitation setting was interviewed several times to track her professional life over a period of five years. The interview protocols were analyzed for thematic content and were re-presented in 'stories' to capture each person's professional learning and change over time. The stories provided a platform for launching a thematic discussion of the pattern and processes of professional learning and change in a social work career. Four dimensions of change were identified: (a) orientation toward the nature of social work practice; (b) place of the self in social work practice; (c) orientation toward the nature of social work knowledge; and (d) personal ideology of social work professionalism. These changes unfolded as these practitioners strove to actualize their image of what good social work is through a process of continuous professional reflection and learning. They went through a number of revisions in their conception of social work, the way they approached practice, and their epistemology of practice. Their stories suggest that the version of social work taught in initial social work education will be given new form and substance as practitioners continue to reflect on and learn from their practice experience. Implications for the education of social workers were discussed.

To Margaret and Adrian

They joined me when I set off this research journey.
We had very good time in Bristol.
They are with me all along.

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I am grateful.

I met them as a stranger. They told me their stories, stories about their life, about their personhood. They accepted me as their confidant. I feel privileged. I learned very valuable things from them. In their stories, I find social work hopeful. I find new meaning in social work and in teaching social work.

I wish to thank all my participants here. It is their stories that give shape and substance to this research.

When I first met her in Bristol, it was in a spacious ground-floor office. We began a long intellectual journey there. I remembered long hours talking with her about social work and social work education in the lovely sitting room of the warden's lodge, watching the summer sun receding with golden beauty outside the long windows. There was wine, and there were a lot of thoughts floating around. I went through the last leg of the research journey with her over many new places in Bristol. I had a relaxing afternoon musing with her over the phenomenon of professional development in a beer garden. Another late morning, we discussed the stories in the garden of the Lion House, under a warm summer sun. I enjoyed a mostly sunny English summer at the Lion House re-writing the dissertation.

I have been very fortunate to have Professor Phyllida Parsloe as my thesis supervisor. I appreciate her patience and interest in listening to my thoughts and taking them beyond. She helped me to put the final manuscript together by her wise comments and more than speedy reading and editing of the manuscript. I owe her more than I can express in words of thank.

Eva Hau came to my rescue when I asked her help at the eleventh hour. She took over the tedious work of editing the fonts, font size and page layout. She went through the manuscript in a meticulous manner to check whether the text had been properly indexed. She tagged the pages where amendments had to be made and highlighted the texts. She prepared the title page, the list of content and reference list for me. She compiled the appendix volumes and could even bind them for me. She must have had a couple of sleepless nights to get all these tedious tasks done. She helped me to put

together the revised manuscript again at the eleventh hour.

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Mary emailed me with encouraging words now and then at a time I was scrambling to get the thesis done.

My wife had made sure that the thesis would be my priority task over the last months of the research journey. She helped checking the reference list and formatting the manuscript. I couldn't have made it without her support.

AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

I declare that the work in this dissertation was carried out in accordance with the Regulation of the University of Bristol. The work is original except where indicated by special reference in text and no part of the dissertation has been submitted for any other degree.

Any views expressed in the dissertation are those of the author and in no way represent those of the University of Bristol.

The dissertation has not been presented to any other University for examination either in the United Kingdom or overseas.

SIGNED:



DATE: 3-10-2001

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PART I

A RESEARCH ACCOUNT

Chapter 1

My Research Story

The Beginning...and (Not Yet) the End

A narrative account is the appropriate form of expression to display research as a practice. (Donald C. Polkinghorne, 1997, p.3)

I am about to compose this research report. It has been a long journey to arrive at this point. The research process was a 'journey' in a metaphorical sense. I set off at a point in my professional career as a social work teacher for an ill defined destination. It was also a 'journey' in a physical and temporal sense. I made my first trip to Bristol in March/April 1992 to explore the object of inquiry. In the next seven years, I have made many trips to Bristol to chart my direction and document what I found on the way. I am going to tell the story of this research journey. A piece of research has to begin with a researcher. The researcher's interest in a phenomenon shapes the initial conception of what a research study is about. How that interest is framed necessarily reflects a particular vantage point. As Steier (1991) puts it, "What I describe in my research is in no way existent apart from my involvement in it—it is not 'out there'." (p.1) In this research study, I am not a disinterested observer, hence the need to declare my authorial presence. What follows here and in the next three chapters is a 'confessional tale' (van Maanen, 1988) of how I framed the study, carried it out, and reached my conclusions at the end.

A winding 'journey'

In the first leg of the 'journey', I revised my view of the phenomenon of interest, and (re)-framed the aim and focus of the study. In the 'received view', a research process should be a well thought-out course of action following a methodological plan to produce useful knowledge about the phenomenon. I do not subscribe to this view. It is an overly idealized picture of normative methodology far removed from

the reality of researching (Bell & Newby, 1977). An authentic account of the research process will be different. Our conception of researching as a knowledge production activity determines what a research process is like. Researching is “primarily about discovering new knowledge” (Gilbert, 1993, p. 33) in an unknown territory. The process involves a continual interaction of ideas and data and may develop in unexpected directions (Roberts, 1981). I had crude ideas of the direction and the terrain. However, I would not be able to plan too far ahead. In the research process, I took my ‘researcher self’ seriously because I was not a disinterested observer. I was researching into something that I wanted to know and which I was also going through. The twists and turns in the research process were ‘mistakes’ by design.

My initial vantage point

All research is grounded on a perspective. How the phenomenon is framed, how the research objectives and research questions are set, invariably depends on the researcher’s positional view. Initially, I had a crude picture of the phenomenon and several research questions. The idea originated from my teaching experience in a ‘theory and practice’ course for practising social workers to examine the ‘indigenization of social work’. The course was grounded on the view that social workers in Hong Kong were practising Western social work. Accepting this standpoint, I engaged my students in a critique of the assumed universality of Western social work (Midgley, 1981) and explored the way to render social work practice culturally responsive. I framed the study as an investigation of how to adapt and modify Western social work for culturally responsive practice:

I would like to limit the study to three main research questions: (a) Do clients perceive the content and process of social work helping in the same way social workers do? If not, what implications will there be for the process and outcome of helping? (b) Given the fact that social workers are trained in the Western model of social work, will they be able to make the necessary adaptation of the theories and methods of practice by a selective adoption of values, aims and procedures? (c) Will social work practice become culturally responsive if social workers have the knowledge of their clients’ host culture? (Personal communication with Professor Parsloe, 28/11/1990)

These research questions were legitimate ones. Around that time, there was an emergent discourse calling for the indigenization of social work. If I had pursued the study along this line, I would not have arrived at where I am now.

On shifting grounds

My first visit to Bristol in March 1992 marked the beginning of the research process. In the next four months, I surveyed the literature on a range of topics: the indigenization of social work, cross-cultural counselling, social work with ethnic and minority groups, social work knowledge, the 'theory-practice' relation. I spotted some shaky assumptions in my orienting perspective. First, cultural difference has been grossly amplified to the extent of reinforcing cultural stereotypes. Second, learning is incomplete and personalized. Beginning social workers do not practise an intact body of theories and therapy models. Third, seeing practice as applying theories is contentious. There has been a long debate on the nature of the 'theory-practice' relation (Rosen, 1994; Thyer, 1994; Meyer, 1992; Witkin, 1991; Goldstein, 1990, 1986; Payne, 1990; Saleebey, 1989; Pilalis, 1986; Reay, 1986; Coccozzelli & Constable, 1985; Eraut, 1985; Lee, 1982; Howe, 1980; Sheldon, 1978). The connection between theories and practice is far more complex than I thought.

I thought social workers in Hong Kong were all practising Western social work because they had learned the theories in their initial social work education. After reviewing the literature, I realized that this perspective was a derivative of the 'technologization of social work' that turned social workers into agents skilled in executing social work interventions. There was no place for the 'self' in practice. However, the separation of the 'self' from practice and the 'personal' from the 'professional' are both recent inventions. The early tradition of social work portrayed social workers as reflexive human beings capable of using the 'self' in an ethical and intelligent way to help another person. Moreover, social work students and beginning social workers invariably found it difficult to apply theories in a consistent manner. Those who are experienced rarely make reference to theories in practice, except for a post facto theoretical accounting when there is the need to do so.

According to Argyris & Schön (1974), professional action has little to do with the 'espoused theories' that practitioners cite to account for their practice. Nonetheless, there is an implicit rationality—'theories-in-use'—underlying what they do. This is knowledge embedded in action. Michael Polanyi (1962) calls it 'tacit

knowledge'. Donald Schön (1983) calls it 'knowing-in-action'. He was a leading figure in challenging 'technical rationality' that reduces professional practice to an instrumental activity, guided by theories, to find the most effective means to achieve a pre-determined end. He suggested an alternative view that shifts the focus from an external body of theoretical knowledge to the practitioner as a thinking, knowing agent who deliberates and reflects on her/his action inside the action context. Around that time, I was reading about the nature of expert practice (Kennedy, 1987) and Dreyfus & Dreyfus' (1986) book *Mind over Machine* on the transitional stages a novice has to go through to become an expert later. In common among these lines of thinking is the view that a practitioner knows, sometimes intuitively, the best course of action to take. However, it is not the instrumental type of knowing because the relation between thinking and acting is not linear—thought before action. Rather, thinking goes hand-in-hand with acting, and thinking is changed by acting and vice versa. In this new conception of practice, a social worker is an active, intelligent human being who mediates between thinking and acting to achieve the moral end of serving the well being of another person.

I left Bristol four months later knowing that I would need to reframe the study. Having disputed the conventional view of a theory-guided practice, it was no longer productive to study how to adapt and modify social work theories for a culturally responsive practice. If what social workers do makes what social work is, I should turn my attention to the person doing social work. I had a second argument. Culture and meaning are embodied in a person's way of seeing, thinking, interpreting and valuing. A social worker will inevitably transform social work theories into an indigenous way of thinking and acting in practice. Thus, my initial concern about indigenising social work practice gave way to a new concern about social workers as knowing and thinking professionals who, individually and collectively, make social work what it is.

An interlude with epistemology

Epistemology was unknown to me until I came across Donald Schön's (1983) book *The Reflective Practitioner*. I began to re-think what knowledge is and how we know what we know in practice. I was taught that social work knowledge was external to a social worker and only theoretical, scientific knowledge were legitimate

knowledge for use in practice. For a long time, social workers have basked in the vanity of being members of a scientific profession, accepting uncritically the notion that scientifically derived theories provide an accurate representation of a client's reality and hence should inform social work intervention. They subscribe to a positivist epistemology. Practitioners are treated as 'end-users' of social work theories. It is the repudiation of this epistemology that forms the topic of my continuing story.

After reading Donald Schön's (1983, 1987) work, I began to pursue the literature on the nature of professional work and professional knowledge. I read the work by Clandinin and Connelly (Clandinin, 1985, 1992; Clandinin & Connelly, 1986a, 1986b; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990), Michael Eraut (1994), and many others in the educational discipline (Beattie, 1995; Martin, 1995; Brown & McIntyre, 1993; Tamir, 1991; Buchmann, 1989; Gilroy, 1989; Johnson, 1989; Zeichner, Tabachnick, & Densmore, 1987; Shulman, 1986; Bromme, 1984; Elbaz, 1981). In the social work discipline, I read the work by Kondrat (1992) on practical rationality, Saleebey (1989) on the separation of knowing from doing in the social work discourse, Goldstein (1990) on the artistry of social work, Dean (1989) on the relationship between forms of knowledge and conceptions of practice, Scott (1988; 1990) on meaning construction and practice wisdom in social work, and lastly Hugh England's (1986) book *Social Work as Art*.

What these works had in common is the notion that social workers operate on a broader epistemological base outside the narrow confine of social work theories. Later, I picked up the notion of 'praxis' from reading Whan's work (1986) and began to appreciate the moral-ethical nature of social work. The core of social work is to discern what is right and good in a client's life. A new image of social work practice emerges. The social worker is a thinking, valuing, reflecting, deliberating, and acting being who gives shape to social work practice. Later on, I read the work of Hartman (1991, 1992, 1993) and other social work scholars (Solas, 1995; Chambon & Irving, 1994; Gowdy, 1994; Howe, 1994; Pozatek, 1994; Gorman, 1993; Sessions, 1993; Lax, 1992) importing postmodern thinking into the social work discourse—what counts as knowledge (epistemology), what constitutes good practice (ethics), and the political nature of practice (multi-vocality, power, language).

The intellectual terrain expanded into an open field wherein I looked for ‘the window with a view’ to see how social workers were constructing social work practice—reproducing practice, re-visioning old practice and inventing new practice. This is a romantic vision, celebrating the agency of social workers in shaping their own practice. However, this vision is obscured by the way we have separated the academic world from the practice world of social work. Knowledge production and dissemination is controlled by the institutional arrangement of social work education that qualifies social workers for practice. Social work students are immersed in a long period of professional education, which among other things, reinforces this institutionalised arrangement (Eraut, 1994, 1985). Once these students embark on their professional careers, they become ‘end-users’ of the professional knowledge taught in social work education.

Transforming academic social work in the real-world of practice

I would have ended this research story if the separation of theories from practice were complete. However, beginners often find the use of theories in practice problematic. Some will adopt an anti-intellectual version of social work when they become experienced social workers. They discount theories as being too abstract to be usable. They value experience more. There is a partial truth in this. Experience does play a significant role in practice whilst theories are often not immediately ‘usable’. Many social workers will be able to get by after working in a field of practice for some years. Practice becomes so routinized that there is little room for thinking and deliberation. It leads to pseudo-development (Skovholt & Rønnestad, 1995) because access to new experience is foreclosed. Experience turns out to be a constraint on what these social workers can know and will know about social work. However, there will be social workers striving for good social work. They will learn and develop professionally in their social work career. If we take snapshots of who they are and how they practise as beginners and later as somewhat experienced practitioners, the difference will show how the official version of social work is transformed into a real-world version.

I am a first-hand witness of this transformation. As a social work teacher, I have found student social workers questioning what we teach in social work education. Once they embark on their social work career, they discover that social work

education does not provide them with the competence to practise. Nonetheless, they are able to learn on the job and become proficient over time. Not every one of them will transform old practices and invent new ones, but some will. I have this experience too. The social work I taught fifteen years ago is not the same social work I teach now. What I learned as a social work student twenty-five years ago was of little relevance to beginning practice. Nonetheless, I could find vitality in my practice in all these years, be it frontline practice, social work supervision, or social work teaching—a vitality fuelled by new experience and new knowledge. Reflecting on my professional biography, I can tell how practitioners make social work what it is—immersing in experience, reflecting on experience, deriving new ideas from it, connecting it to new ideas, experimenting with new ideas, and immersing in new experience. Social work practice has never been static.

Social workers storying their professional life

I story my professional biography to show the opportunities for social workers to confront problems, experiment with ideas and reflect on their practice experience, hence changing their practice and themselves as social workers. Social workers enact social work and, in the process, give the shape and substance to its character. However, most of the time we simply get on with our professional life because there is little space to reflect on our changes as a social worker. Yet, there are changes as we become more experienced and probably wiser as a social worker. What are these changes and what brings them about? What is the process like? I am interested in knowing whether and how these changes are manifested in the professional life of social workers. If indigenising social work is a phenomenon in practice, it will be found in these changes as we learn in our professional lives. So, I decided to study the phenomenon of professional learning and change in the professional life of social workers.

After re-thinking the aim and focus of the study, I began to examine methodological questions. I was reading Clandinin and Connelly's work on narrative inquiry in education (Clandinin, 1985; Clandinin & Connelly, 1986a; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Clandinin, 1992). I picked up the 'story' metaphor in the study of people's experience and the meaning they made of it. I decided to talk to a group of

social workers and collect their 'stories' of how they made the transition from a student to a beginning social worker and what changes they had gone through in subsequent years. In my study, a group of social workers narrated their professional life (and personal life also, as I discovered later) and the version of social work they subscribed to, enacted, and aspired for at different points in their social work career.

Finding research participants

I had two groups of participants. The first group worked in family service centres. I was familiar with this practice setting. Having this group of participants in one practice setting avoided setting-specific variations. A former colleague helped me to recruit eleven family service workers for the study. I added a past student to this group. The second group was made up of four graduating students from our BSW programme (the first cohort graduated in 1994). I wanted to track their experience on a real-time basis. According to the literature on professional socialization and professional development (Huberman, 1995; Craig, 1995; Fook & Hawkins, 1995; Baskett & Marsick, 1992; Skovholt & Rønnestad, 1992; Calderhead, 1988; Furlong & Cook, 1988; Hugman, 1987; O'Connor & Dalglish, 1986; Geertsma, Parker, & Whitbourne, 1982; Atkinson, 1981; Pearson, 1975), experience in the first year of practice would be crucial to later professional development.

Composing the research report

I began to collect stories from the family service participants in May 1994. Methodological issues closed in soon afterwards. I shall story this part of the research process when I present a methodological account in Chapter 4. Skipping this for now, I will conclude the story by an account of how I composed this research report, which is the last leg of the research journey. How to compose the report is an important part of the research story because it is the only artifact that gives form and substance to the study. I began to plan this task during my visit to Bristol around Easter time in 1999. I decided that, whilst this piece of research writing should speak the participants' voice, it would also speak mine. It should offer a first-person account of the research process, providing 'thick descriptions' (Geertz, 1983) and dense interpretations of the social workers' stories. I mentally re-lived the research process again and began to write about it. This piece of writing constitutes the introductory

chapter. The next three chapters will provide a full account of how I framed the study, my methodological plan, and the ‘natural history’ of the research process. In Part II of the report, I am going to present the stories in a condensed form, either by way of re-telling them or in a fictional first-person account. Each story leads on to a reflective discussion that connects to the one for the preceding story. Thus, the sequencing of these stories is important. Part III offers a synthesis of what I have learned through listening, re-telling, writing, reflecting and analyzing these stories. I am going to write on the following themes to capture the learning and implications drawn from the study as a social work teacher:

- On the conception of social work
- On the process of learning, change, and professional development
- On the epistemology of practice
- On the nature of practice
- On social work professionalism
- On the education of social workers

I am going to end the research report with a postscript offering a reflexive discussion of the quality of the research.

Chapter 2

(Re)Framing the Study A Story of an Intellectual Journey

“We use ideas in the literature in order to develop perspectives on our own data, drawing out comparisons, analogies, and metaphors.” (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996, p. 110)

It is a long intellectual journey. I began to teach a new ‘theory and practice’ course in 1990 in a programme for practising social workers. It makes little sense to teach practitioners the practice of therapy models in a lecture theatre. Therefore, I decided to engage them in an examination of their practice experience with culture as the sensitising concept. A year later, I re-activated the idea of pursuing a Ph.D. study on indigenising social work practice. I then embarked on a long intellectual journey. Since then, researching and teaching have cross-fertilized each other. I lectured on what I had read and learned in the research process. Over the past six years, I have written many short papers for the course that captured the intellectual work done in this study. Most of them were written in 1996, after I had embarked on the second series of interviews with the family service participants. A few were written in later years. I am going to extract from these writings to form part of the literature review. They convey my intellectual work that framed the object of this study and shaped its ‘intellectual terrain’. I present these writings in a different font (Courier New), in the context of the work of scholars who have enriched my intellectual work in this study. This is unconventional but worthwhile trying if it helps articulate the meaning I made of the literature.

The beginning: Indigenising social work practice

The problem of transplanting Western social work to Hong Kong is salient in practitioners’ experience. Therapeutic intervention based on the Western professional model is essentially alien to Chinese society and receives no support from the cultural belief system (Ho, 1979). Culture finds its expression in client expectancy—what help is needed, what constitutes help, how one gets help from a professional helper, and how the roles of the helper and the recipient of help are defined (Higginbotham, 1977). Initially, I thought practitioners would practise Western social work in a culturally insensitive manner. At the time I graduated from the MSW programme, there were

already early attempts in Hong Kong to promote the use of indigenous literature in social work education and sensitise social work students to cultural variations (Hodge, 1980). The search for a 'Chinese social work' became prominent in the professional discourse (APASWE, 1992, 1994) in subsequent years. It was against this backdrop that I initiated this study. I began my intellectual journey exploring the notion of adapting Western social work theories for local practice, which was a received view at that time. In 1995, *The Hong Kong Journal of Social Work* issued a call for papers on the development of indigenous practice, framing the issue as follows:

... stimulating discussion can be based on empirical intervention experiences... that the discussion should have critical examination of at least a major intervention approach/theory, its effectiveness to work with Chinese clients, modifications of the approach recommended or implications for effective practice.

At first, I did not find this line of reasoning problematic. Professional practice must be grounded on theories. Therefore, indigenising social work would necessarily begin with modifying social work theories.

Re-thinking social work professionalism

I made my first foray into the social work literature during my first visit to Bristol in 1992. I searched the literature on cross-cultural and ethnic practice, and got the impression that practitioners should guard against ethnocentrism. For instance, Green (1982) notes that "placing training priorities on specific techniques without consideration of the cultural characteristics of the clients who might be the subject of those techniques seems to be naive and professionally ethnocentric" (p.226). However, the cultural variable was emphasized, often to the extent of subscribing to cultural stereotypes. Thus, adapting theories and practice to the cultural variable may mean adopting a directive approach in counselling Asian clients. Intuitively, I found this approach to indigenising social work practice unconvincing. If Chinese clients tended to prefer directive counsellors, I would spot it in counselling sessions. Why do I need a theory to guide me in what to do? If respect for authority were a cultural trait of Chinese clients, why wouldn't local social workers know that?

I discovered the answer after studying the literature on professions and professional practice. Professional culture has a dominant influence on practice. Practitioners adopt a professional language to name and interpret their clients' reality. They induce their clients to enact the role in a way that validates their professional role. This is the 'role affirming' phenomenon (Holiman & Lauver, 1987). Client behaviours' contrary to their expectations are rationalised or intellectualised away as 'resistance' or

'transference' (Rojek, Peacock, & Collins, 1988). Thus, a prominent feature of professional practice is to preserve our sense of 'being professional' not only in our work with clients but also in the talk about our work—and grounding practice on theories is a central tenet to social work professionalism. We still need a theory to crown what we know with an aura of professionalism even if we know that Chinese clients respect our professional authority.

Professionalism entails commitment to a particular body of knowledge and skill both for its own sake and for the use to which it is put—that is to say, commitment to preserve, refine, and elaborate that knowledge and skill, to do good work, and, where it has application to worldly problems, to perform it well for the benefit of others.
(Freidson, 1994, p. 210)

We need theories and skills to help our clients. Professional helping is considered superior to lay helping because we help with professional knowledge and skills. The commitment to knowledge serves to establish our work with clients as professional work.

Professionalism and Its Epistemological Implications for Social Work

Franklin (1986) portrays two prominent social work leaders in the States in the early days of the profession—Jane Addams and Mary Richmond. It is noted that the making of the social work profession could have taken a different turn if Jane Addams' opposition to social work being professionalised prevailed. It is also interesting to note that Mary Richmond had, in her commitment to introduce rational inquiry into social work practice, joined force with some university teachers to establish social work education in close association with the social sciences.

If Jane Addams' idea prevailed, social work education would not be a professional study in the universities. Practitioners would get their training on the job, observing and interacting with people needing social work help. The profession had taken a false start in the beginning by embracing inauspiciously the 'rational-technical' orientation. As Franklin (1986) noted, Mary Richmond had failed to "connect epistemology to ideology and, subsequently,

to link the methods or techniques she proposed to a theory of practice" (p. 519). The profession of social work has since tried to secure its professional status by embracing the empirical-positivist paradigm to develop its knowledge base.

June 12, 1992

Professionalising women's work

Social work is generally seen as an applied profession, its practice conforms to the technical-rational model. It involves applying professional knowledge for instrumental problem solving. Implicit is a logical link between theory and practice. Theories generate the methods and techniques that practitioners employ to achieve an intended outcome. However, seeing social work as an 'applied science' does not go well with our characterisation of it as a caring profession. Caring is what most people are capable of doing. In what way is caring in social work a professional activity?

...caring work involves a degree of intimacy, of closeness socially (emotionally and/or physically) between the carer and the cared-for. Moreover, it requires the professional to recognize, even to make central in theory and practice, the individuality of the person receiving the service.... [However], the underlying logic of the established professions has been to see the individual as an example, an instance of general cases and categories... but is not a matter of moral choice on the part of individual professionals: it is the underlying structure of their occupation...it is the social status of these skills as 'women's work' which is used to devalue such work in debates about professionalism, and which underpins the 'semi-professional' concept. (Hugman, 1991, p. 15-16)

I became sensitised to the gendered nature of professions and male dominance in defining the notion of professionalism. Caring as women's work is assigned lower social status because it does not call for abstract knowledge and technical competence. Thus, it makes good sense for social work to emphasize knowledge and skills. It is a professionalising strategy. However, will this also mean distorting social work's intrinsic character as a caring practice?

Reflection on the History of Professionalising Social Work

Is social work a profession? The same question was raised when I received social work training in the mid-seventies. We also adopted the trait approach and we ended with the

verdict that social work is a semi-profession. It intrigues me that the same question is still raised in a social work course twenty years later. Isn't it telling that the strife for professional status is something central to social work? Much of the history of social work is a history of how an occupational group whose work was about caring and helping, and whose members were mainly women, tried to attain professional status in the image of the male professions.

In this lecture, I dwelled on Kunzel's (1993) historical analysis of how professional social work took over a domain of caring and helping work previously carried out by 'charity ladies'. There is much to learn from looking back into our history. This new generation of women succeeded in establishing themselves as experts by using social science knowledge to construct a discourse on unwed pregnancy as a social problem. They turned an occupational domain founded upon feminine values of caring, compassion, and nurturing into professional work by moulding themselves in the image of the male professions.

When we ask the question whether social work is a profession, there is a taken-for-granted assumption that the present conception of professionalism is unproblematic. Being professional assumes three values: expertise, science, and exclusiveness. I refer to this conception of professionalism as 'expert professionalism'. I offer an alternative conception, one that is compatible with the nature of social work. I call it 'enabling professionalism'. We have been distorting the true nature of social work in our strife to conform to the image of the male professions. Our talk about science, empirical social work, evaluation, knowledge and research takes us farther away from what social work is about—caring and people-to-people help.

September 22, 1996

Re-thinking the nature of social work

Do we need a professional practitioner to give care to another person if caring is what most people are capable of doing? This question inquires into the nature of social work and its knowledge base. In his book *Social Work as Art*, Hugh England (1986) gives a penetrating argument why social work is not an instrumental, technical practice, nonetheless involves intelligent action even though its work borders on the 'ordinary'.

- To identify social work as a process of understanding the meaning that people give to their experience is to emphasize the ordinary character of social work. Social work does become a matter of 'common sense'... The 'meanings' which are the content of this understanding are concrete and diverse, always idiosyncratic, by their very nature never the 'property' of any technical professional. (p. 33)

The role of the worker 'defined' knowledge is to inform his understanding: he will understand more or understand quicker because of his professional learning... The real test of the worker's learning is never in his ability to show mastery of abstract knowledge, but in the way such knowledge is plundered and fragmented to inform his practice; his formal learning becomes useful in as much as it is inseparable and indistinguishable from his colloquial learning. (p. 34-35)

Social work...is a matter of attitude and value, constructs and ideology. This does not render knowledge irrelevant, but makes clear that the role of knowledge is to inform such perception... Social workers must use diverse perspectives to make intelligible situations which are diverse. Phenomena are explained by the imposition upon them of ordered templates which are sufficiently appropriate; the order is not inherent in them but created by perception. The worker gives situations their 'meaning', and his meaning—like any person—is a result of the application of learned constructs. The social worker, however, has acquired some of his perspectives as the result of 'formal' learning... (p. 36-37)

If social work were an activity in the realm of common human experience, social workers can hardly claim any exclusivity for what they do. Whilst social workers act intelligently, their action is not informed solely by formal learning. They do not apply a theory as such. Rather, a theory is "plundered and fragmented" for use in practice. They deploy constructs, not a coherent system of ideas (theories), to inform what they do. Knowledge is to inform understanding, not to direct it. Hugh England's view disputes many received ideas about social work.

In the earlier days, social work was a 'moral' practice with strong emphasis on values. Whan (1986) evokes Aristotle's notion of phronesis—'practice wisdom' or 'practical common-sense'—to explicate the moral-practical nature of practice. Phronesis is the kind of knowledge with which one mediates between the universal and the particular. It involves judgment, choice and reflection on what constitutes the goal for which one acts. Social workers need to understand their clients, their normative orientation, and the purpose in their action. To acquire such shared understanding takes the form of dialogue, and it entails a moral engagement with the other person.

Searching for the Goodness of Social Work

Professionalism can be "bad". It may mean trapping people in clienthood under the terms dictated by professionals who wield power to assess, intervene, and ultimately determine what is good. However, we are no longer certain about what 'good practice' is. Effectiveness is not the right criterion for judging the 'goodness' of practice. Indeed, effective practice may mean 'bad practice' if effectiveness is equated to attaining whatever pre-determined ends we set for our clients and change is attributed to our effort.

Now, we question professional power, positivist epistemology, monolithic values, formal theories, in short many of the 'received ideas' about social work, by nature a practical activity bounded by time and space. This is why a discussion of 'good practice' has its place in this course. Toward good practice is going to be a perpetual strife among social workers. It provides the focus for social workers to conduct a critical discourse and rejuvenate social work's vitality in changing time and changing place.

December 16, 1996

Clients have a part in making social work what it is

We should never lose sight of our clients; we are not the only party in this activity called social work. I used to say: "It takes two persons to practise." If the essence of social work is to help another person, we cannot afford to talk about social work professionalism, social work theories, and how we help, without our clients in the picture.

The three elements of social work...were the social worker, the client, and the setting which they meet... Social work is a special activity where people interact in special social roles as 'social worker' and 'client': its nature is thus partly defined by those roles. Understanding social work involves examining the factors which establish the social positions of these actors in a complex social relationships. (Payne, 1991, p. 9)

The professionalising project has increasingly marginalized our clients as key actors

in making social work what it is. The technical-rational view of practice has turned our clients into inert objects of professional action. We are experts insofar as our clients conform to our definition of the client role.

There is One Way of Grieving: the Professional Way

Susan Cohen's (*Time*, July 29, 1996) story left me perplexed. Why were helping professionals so uncaring? These grief therapists had a certain way of looking at grief, talking about grief, understanding the grief process, judging when and how one should emerge from grieving. They could not understand her experience. How could they understand their clients' experience if they were not prepared to give up the professional discourse that had rendered their professional status credible?

Grief is an affective experience and grieving is how a person lives through the meaning of loss. However, once that person takes on the client status, his/her world is governed by the professional discourse. Professional help strips away the authenticity of both the person's experience and the meaning s/he attaches to it. They told Susan the grief process should not last so long. Hers was a pathological one. This is the power of professional discourse. It defines what is normative or pathological in clients' lives. It negates and violates personal experience by subjugating it to a new meaning system that justifies professional authority. There is only one valid script describing what the grief process is like and how the person should outlive it. This is how grief therapy is done. Susan must be a "wrong client".

October 3, 1996

Science and social work

We privilege our professional discourse and adopt a monolithic view of the client's reality prescribed by our theories. For a long time, the empiricist-positivist paradigm has dominated the epistemology of practice, defining what valid knowledge is and the

relation between knowledge and practice. Knowledge for practice is to be developed through scientific method. Research production is the work of academic researchers and research-based knowledge is to be applied by practitioners. Thus, it results in the separation of knowledge production from knowledge use, and the control over research production by researchers and academic people (Karger, 1983). The profession's concern about the 'research-practice link' emerged in the 70's when, after serious attempts in the 60's failed to prove the effectiveness of social work, the profession began a self-examination of its knowledge claim. Joe Fischer (1973) questioned the effectiveness of social work. Sheldon (1986) offered an updated review a decade later. They attributed the problem to the profession's failure to develop a scientific base for practice, hence an urgent call for a science of social work.

The empirical practice movement advocated for the adoption of research procedures in practice so as to make it amenable to empirical testing, the use of interventions with demonstrated effectiveness, and the production of practice knowledge by practitioner-researchers (Reid, 1994). Noting that "the gains achieved have been partial, uneven, and not always clear" (p. 180), the author attributed the lacklustre accomplishment of this three-decade long effort to the lack of 'grass-root' involvement. "It badly needs agency-based advocates, implementers, and...practitioner-researchers." (p. 181). However, the failure is more fundamental than Reid admitted. Research utilisation by social workers was problematic (Chavkin, 1986; Mutschler, 1984; Rosen, 1983). Whether research-based knowledge can be translated into practice is questionable because it is de-contextualized knowledge, but application is contextualized. This suggests a gap between knowledge and practice. Perhaps, knowledge for practice should take a certain form for it to be usable by practitioners. What then is the nature of knowledge for practice and the 'knowledge-practice link'?

Against 'Scientific Social Work': Science is a Poor Metaphor for Social Work

After two decades of working toward a science for social work, it is still far from being a scientific practice. How can it be if social work is as much artistry as it is science? The epistemological standpoint of positivist science is at odds with the nature of practice. It is assumed that generalized, context-free knowledge will be applicable in practice. This assumption will not hold since practice is context-bound and involves practitioners' deliberation on

values and moral judgment as much as it involves instrumental problem-solving. Subjectivity is a given condition in practice. We understand our clients only in a subjective stance and in relation to the particular life circumstances they are in. We cannot be objective even though we wish we could.

I am for a knowledge-based practice. What I find disconcerting is to embrace scientific knowledge as the only valid knowledge for guiding practice. This notion of scientific knowledge sees social work practice as a technical-rational activity. I declare my position: Social work is not, and should not be, a technical-rational activity. Practice involves moral-ethical reasoning, empathic understanding, deliberation and judgment. How can social work practice be manual-driven, as though there is a standard solution to a whole class of problems? It is like cutting social work into a shape that fits the positivist paradigm, displacing unpredictability, uncertainty, and moral-ethical consideration by predictability, control, and instrumental problem-solving. This will be a different kind of social work, one that is premised on expert authority and subjugation of clients.

November 7, 1996

Re-thinking the theory-practice relation

In the technical-rational view, practitioners apply theories to guide their practice. However, the connection between theory and practice is tenuous at best. There is disjunction between theory and practice. The work by Argyris and Schön (1974) shows that the espoused theories that practitioners claim to have guided their practice differ from the 'theories-in-use' revealed in what they did. Research studies (Carew, 1979; Barbour, 1984; Hardiker, 1981; Ryan, Fook, & Hawkins, 1995) suggest that both beginners and experienced practitioners do not use formal theories in the way depicted in the technical-rational view. Ryan et al.'s (1995) five-year longitudinal study shows that social work students made little use of theories at any stage of the course. There was minimal use, or minimal awareness of the use of formal theory. Similar to the findings in

Carew's (1979) study, formal theory is not a necessary trait for social workers' survival, but practice wisdom is. There was a predominance of individualized approaches in both assessment and intervention, similar to the findings of O'Connor & Dalgleish's (1986) study. In the second report of the same study two years later (Fook, Ryan, & Hawkins, 1997), the authors report that simple, linear application of formal theories in practice is the mark not of the expert but of the novice professional. Social work theorizing are more about underlying assumptions, the use of particular concepts, and developing practice wisdom in a seemingly intuitive way than using articulated integrated theoretical frameworks.

In an empirical study of the relation between theories and practice among clinical practitioners (Cocozzelli, & Constable, 1986), the authors conclude that the practitioners have developed their own internalised, perhaps experientially-based paradigms from which they derive guidance for conceptualising client problems, finding an appropriate emotional distance for the helping relationship, and selecting active as opposed to reflective helping techniques. They draw on theoretical concepts without being rigidly wedded to them, relying instead on their experience to guide their practice. Theoretical influence and actual practice represent different levels of practice which are largely independent of each other. This finding does not challenge the relevance of theory to practice. Rather, it questions the way theories are used in practice. Practitioners draw on many theories. This will be the case if they continue to learn from their practice experience and engage in continuous professional development activities.

It is rare, and indeed unheard of, that any practitioner only and exclusively follows the practice prescriptions of his or her own exclusive and orthodox school and disregards all other information from outside his or her own training body or the particular 'bibles' of his or her own orientation... (Clarkson, 1997, p.41)

The Phenomenon of Using Theories in Practice

Assessment is a professional activity, hence is expected to be theory-driven. In the beginning, we have only very vague notions of how to proceed with information gathering. We have no choice but to begin with the 'presenting problem'. As we proceed, certain information may hit us as the clue to know the 'real problem'. It is like fitting information to a plot for constructing client problems. By the time we have found a plot that gives the best fit, we know what the 'real problem'

is and the causal account for it. Loose pieces fall into place to give a complete picture of the problem. Problem identification and causal analysis go hand in hand. Assessment involves pattern recognition. The more experienced practitioners will have a larger number of plots in stock and they will be faster than the novice in picking up important clues for pattern recognition. In a conceptual model (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1986) of the progression from novice practice to expert practice, expert practitioners rely heavily on experientially derived patterns in coming to grips with the practice situation. On the contrary, beginners rely on theories and principles.

We switch from one theory to another. This is one strand of eclectic practice. Another strand is akin to a 'grocery-shopping' metaphor. We pick whatever elements from the stock of theories in our possession we find useful. It entails a process of synthesis, adding new elements alongside the accumulation of assessment information. Assessment is premised on a kind of pragmatic epistemology. We draw on whatever theoretical concepts to make sense of the information we have. Can we pick elements from different theories even if their basic assumptions are incompatible with each other? Can theoretical concepts be used in isolation from the theoretical system that confers meaning to them in the first place?

October 25, 1996

The phenomenon of practice

The profession has had a long debate on what constitutes the appropriate epistemology for social work (Heineman, 1981; Geismar & Wood, 1982; Haworth, 1984; Gordon, 1984; Imre, 1984; Peile, 1988; Witkin & Gottschalk, 1989). However, the debate necessarily premises on our conception of the nature of social work. Carr (1986) describes the nature of professional practice as consciously performed intentional activity. The practitioner has certain schemes of thought in terms of which s/he makes sense of her/his practice. They are tacit and at best only partially articulated.

Practitioners acquire this kind of knowledge only through practice. However, they cannot describe and explain what they know in skilled professional practice. As it cannot be communicated, it will not be accumulated as part of the professional knowledge.

Kennedy (1987) reviewed four different conceptions of expertise, each incorporates a different view of how expertise influences professional actions. The 'applied science view' that gives rise to the notion of scientific practice sees expertise as the application of theory or general principles. Expertise involves the ability to recognize the cases to which these general principles apply. However, cases do not present themselves to practitioners as examples of general principles, unless they fit cases to a 'tunnel vision'. There are also cases in which practitioners must decide which principle to apply. The author argues that "major tasks of profession is to analyse situations and that analysis occurs in the context of action...such that each influences the other" (p. 148). Expertise involves deliberate action in which knowing, analysis, judgment and the action itself takes place inside the action context. It can only be acquired through learning from experience, but experience contributes to expertise only if practitioners are capable of learning from it.

Dreyfus & Dreyfus' (1986) seminal work, *Mind over machine*, offers a five-stage model of the development of expertise. There is a progression through changed perception of the task environment and the mode of behaviour that accompanies skill acquisition with increased practice. The novice is a detached subject consciously decomposing his environment into recognizable elements and following abstract rules. On the contrary, the expert immerses in the situation. S/he does not follow rules, yet knows what to do on the basis of mature and practised understanding. "When things are proceeding normally, experts don't solve problems and don't make decisions; they do what normally works" (p. 31). Whilst most expert performance is ongoing and non-reflective, there are instances when an expert deliberates before acting and critically reflects on her/his intuition.

In his seminal work *The reflective practitioner*, Donald Schön (1983) describes a model of deliberate action that held for professional practitioners. A practitioner imposed an interpretive frame of reference on to the situation so as to make sense of it. The frame of reference often came by analogy to another situation s/he had encountered, and it enabled her/him to define the new case as a member of a familiar class. The practitioner was able to form mental experiments to see what would happen if s/he solved the problem as defined, judged these consequences both against her/his

definition of the problem and other criteria of satisfactoriness. However, if the outcome was not satisfactory, s/he would review the original framing of the situation, examine the theory implicit in it, try to see what was wrong with it, and finally reframe the situation in search of a better solution. In situations like this, the practitioner engaged in 'reflection-in-action'. S/he became a researcher in the practice context and sought to construct a new theory of the unique case. "Reflection tends to focus interactively on the outcomes of action, the action itself, and the intuitive knowing implicit in the action." (p. 56)

The knowledge that practitioners hold and use

By now, it is quite clear that practitioners possess some unique, personalised knowledge evolved from their practice experience. Only novice practitioners apply a theory as though there is a direct correspondence between theories and practice. Johnson (1989) suggests that teachers' personal practical knowledge is knowledge-in-process that springs from the teacher's practical activities directed toward certain ends in a context-sensitive manner, responding to developing purposes and unexpected or unpredictable occurrences or contingences. Knowing occurs in the course of developing intelligent action in a practice situation. He concludes that teachers' knowledge is the very way they construct their reality as they live it through their embodiment in the meaning, conduct, and understanding of their practice. Thus, no verbal and intellectualised account can fully reveal teachers' knowledge-in-process. Much of it is tacit and will remain so.

Sheppard (1995) offers an epistemological grounding of social work on the way humans understand the world. We are capable of knowing something from our experience in the world. Hence, we are also capable of knowledge production. Social workers will be able to know something about their practice as a result of having repeated exposure to similar experiences in their work. It involves "a retroductive process of hypothesis testing and reflection" (p. 282). However, such practice wisdom remains 'personalised knowledge' because it is not written or chronicled. It is passed along by word of mouth. Thus, it is restricted to the 'practice community' in the workplace. It is mostly case-focused and is unconnected to comparable cases. In an ethnographic study of how individual practitioners' work comes to be shared among professional peers in a social work office, Pithouse (1987) had this observation:

Team members did seek more private confidence and support: There are regular advice-sharing among three pairs of workers.... informal but regular consultancy

partnership. They are typically the more recently qualified members and with less than four years of experience. Four veterans... with much more than four years of experience are notably independent of partnerships. Two recent recruits still consult all who have the time or inclination to respond. People base advice-giving and receiving on certain status expectations and reciprocities. Most partnership entails no subordination of status. Participants draw on shared assumptions of complementary skills and abilities...workers seek the support of a colleague whose skills and attitudes are similar to their own and they avoid those who they consider might advance assertively their own viewpoints. (p. 54).

Providing oral accounts about clients is a routine but crucial event to engender a shared view of practice. The competent worker shows "she is a 'good' worker by giving a 'good' account that exercises her common-sense theory of doing work" (p.109). Telling the case is itself a skilled practice accomplished by capable members.

Re-thinking our Knowledge Claim: What is the Knowledge Relevant to What We Do?

What is the knowledge status of what we know? Is what we know the only kind of knowledge? If there are many kinds of knowledge, do we still enjoy the privileged status of being in possession of professional knowledge? How do we know? How do we know what we know is the kind of knowledge relevant to what we do? These questions call for a re-thinking of our knowledge claim, what constitutes knowledge, how knowledge is produced, and how we establish our knowledge claim. If our knowledge claim is open to question, what has sustained our claim of professional status will lose its rational authority.

I traced the origin of the empirical-positivist paradigm to the thinking of Descartes that the external reality, the natural world, can be objectively known through our sensory faculty. We adopt an objectivist stance of observing it from a distance, hence the separation of the knower from the known. Knowledge is an accurate representation of the objective reality out there. Knowing is a human activity for the sake of knowing the world, its human purpose is not considered.

A community of knowledge workers, the scientists and later the social scientists have over the years refined the methods of inquiry and controlled knowledge production. Disciplinary lines are drawn within this community. Within each disciplinary domain, there are epistemic rules governing knowledge production and the criteria to judge knowledge claim.

Seeing knowledge production as a social practice fundamentally undermines the Cartesian view. As knowledge becomes a product of social convention, change the convention and one will arrive at different knowledge. Thus, knowledge is not fact or truth. What we know is the outcome of our way of knowing premised on some a priori assumptions. Its epistemological status is not absolute. Only in a period of 'normal science' (Kuhn, 1970) is knowledge mistaken for truth.

In the hermeneutic paradigm of knowledge development, "there is no way in which human beings can apprehend the 'true nature' of reality; all learning is mediated through language and the theories embedded in that language" (Henkel, 1995, p. 71). Knowing is embedded in a linguistic world and a world of beliefs, traditions, and culture. New learning is possible through examining the presuppositions or prejudices inherent in our language and our way of understanding things.

What we know is intricately related to how we know. There are many ways of knowing and hence many forms of knowledge (Hartman, 1990). Scientific knowledge is not epistemologically superior. For the 'applied professions', knowledge production cannot be separated from the practice that such knowledge is to support. Previously, we see practice as deriving from theories. We look for knowledge that can provide the means of solving problems. However, if social work is a practical activity and involves discourses on values and feelings, what practitioners need is practical wisdom—knowledge that is founded on 'practical rationality'.

November 21, 1996

The education of social workers

What should social work teachers teach? Initial social work education appears to be largely irrelevant, except for socializing students. Professional learning on the job is more important than initial social work education in shaping one's practice. As Eraut (1994) has pointed out, initial professional education should be seen as the beginning of a life-long process of professional education. Both its aim and content need re-thinking. If the simple, linear theory-practice relation is a myth in the practice world, what then is the point of teaching theories? Given that much of what practitioners know is learned inside practice, should the aim of initial social work education be geared towards the experiential mode of learning? Beyond initial social work education, practitioners learn on their own and with professional peers. Beginning practice will be the crucial period in developing a personalized pattern of practice. How do people learn from practice experience? Whilst Donald Schön (1983) highlights the value of reflection for creating new knowledge and surfacing tacit knowledge, Eraut (1994) cautions "people do not know what they know". How tacit knowledge can be articulated in propositional form is still unclear. Kennedy (1987) holds the view that people need training to learn from experience. He suggests a problem-based mode of learning in which students learn, through cognitive apprenticeship under the guidance of teachers, to define the problem and find a solution in a multifaceted situation.

Back to the beginning—reframing the object of the inquiry

I arrived at this insight: Practitioners pursuing life-long learning will indigenise social work. Indigenization is an endeavour played out in practitioners' everyday practice. The ground upon which we construct a 'Chinese social work' is where practitioners talk, think and act, that is, where professional action is carried out. Culturally responsive practice is founded upon a stock of knowledge acquired by individual practitioners who, in the course of their work, transform the institutionalised professional knowledge taught in initial social work education into practice knowledge. Social work education contributes to this endeavour by equipping would-be practitioners with conceptual tools for reflecting on their practice experience and making the crucial connection between practice and knowledge production. It is the development of practice-created knowledge by individual practitioners that holds the promise of indigenising social work and empowering its practitioners.

The assertion that increased experience will turn novice practitioners into experienced practitioners is self-apparent. However, it is not clear how increased

experience will play out in social workers' professional life and what qualitative changes in practice it will bring about. Are experienced practitioners better than novice practitioners? Better in what way? How do they become better? With answers to these questions, we would be in a better position to examine the existing practice of professional preparation for social workers and what could be done to support professional learning on the job. Thus, I wish to address the following research question: What is it like for practitioner to learn and change in their professional life?

Chapter 3

On Methodology and Methods Thinking, Doing, and Writing Research

The purpose of research is to provide a steady supply of alternative ways of thinking about the universe and those who inhabit it." (Clift, et al., 1995, p.5)

I am positively certain about the value of this study. The research question is good. However, I am not so sure whether my audience will find in this study a useful way of thinking about this question and “a ‘window’ through which [they] might ‘see’ and comment” (Miller 1997, p.2). It boils down to this question: How do I know other people’s life well enough so that what I describe—their experiences, meaning of these experiences, and changes in beliefs and practices—is not only plausible but also worthwhile for the audience to know? I need to display how I proceed to know in a ‘disciplined way’ to know, and this requires me to adopt a reflexive stance. This chapter offers a ‘method talk’ with the intention of assuring the audience that what I am going to report in subsequent chapters is the product of a ‘disciplined way’ of knowing. This is also an important chapter in a Ph.D. dissertation. The examiners are interested in how I know as much as in what I know.

During a study break in Bristol in 1997, I re-examined my methodological position after having conducted the second interviews with some of the family service participants and written their stories. Before I left, I had a discussion with Professor Parsloe on my methodological position whilst waiting for the airport coach. I talked about methods—how I collected stories, re-presented them in text, and interpreted what they told. The discussion went beyond method to methodology, then beyond methodology to philosophical assumptions underlying research as a knowledge-producing activity—the means of knowing, how the knower and the known are related, why the knower cannot stand outside the means to know, and how the means to know are related to what is known. Research is a fluid process that requires making methodological decisions along the way, “in which data and accounts emerge from researchers’ management of the interconnections between the various aspects of their studies...the interrelationship between the contexts of their studies and the methods that they use to observe, describe and analyse aspects of everyday life” (Miller, 1997, p. 4). These are the basic tenets of my methodological position.

A social constructionist standpoint

It is a comforting thought that research is about providing alternative ways of thinking and not finding truth, because it spares me of the difficulty in wrestling with philosophical issues pertaining to the justification of truth claim. Since taking up this research study, I have seen myself moving to a social constructionist standpoint of knowledge and knowledge production. The social constructionist approach is predicated on the assumption that “the terms by which the world is understood are social artefacts, products of historicity situated interchanges among people” (Gergen, 1985: 267, cited in Schwandt, 1994, p. 127). In particular, two working assumptions of social constructionism (Gergen, 1999) are influential in shaping my methodological orientation. First, the terms by which we understand our world and our self are neither required nor demanded by “what there is” (p. 47). Language does not represent an independent world. It is possible to have a potentially unlimited number of descriptions and explanations of our world, and no one particular description or explanation can be considered superior. Second, our modes of description, explanation and/or representation are derived from relationship. Language gains its meaning from the way in which it is used within relationship. “What we take to be true about the world or self, is thus not a product of the individual mind... Meanings are borne of coordinations among persons—agreements, negotiations, affirmations...relationships stand prior to all that is intelligible.” (p. 48) There is no single objective reality that is factual and existing at a level of abstraction beyond the current situation. What constitutes reality will be dependent upon the temporary joint perceptions generated by the interaction of social actors.

Researching is therefore a process of ‘world-making’ in that “different worlds are ‘knowledged’ or ‘languaged’ into being” (Usher, 2001, p. 49). Knowledge is what I make of my understanding of the world and my experience in it. I am not a naïve knower of this world. I enter this research study with certain interest in mind, my professional biography, and some prior notions derived from the discourse community of which I am a member. In the end, what I make of this world will only be one way of thinking about it. “Research is always collective in two important senses. First, in the sense that it is intertextual...points to the history in textual production... Second, that it is a delimited set of activities legitimated by a relevant community where certain activities are judged appropriate and function as criteria for validating knowledge outcomes...” (Usher, 2001, p. 51). I need to connect my work to the corpus of literature, part of which is presented in the preceding chapter. My work is also located in a

knowledge-producing community and hence is judged by a number of audiences. They will have a part in validating the way I construct this world. They constitute an important context of this research (Miller, 1997).

Human science inquiry: Studying people's lived experiences and meanings

Max van Manen's *Researching Lived Experience* (1990) and Donald E. Polkinghorne's *Narrative Knowing and the Human Sciences* (1988) introduced me to human science research. Reading them had substantially enriched the philosophical grounding of my methodological orientation in this study. Human sciences study the reality of human experience as people act purposefully in the world and create meanings out of their experiences. The aim is to explicate the meaning of human phenomena and understand the lived structures of meanings by reading or hearing, and then interpreting the texts of human experience. These disciplines do not produce knowledge that leads to the prediction and control of human existence. Rather, they produce knowledge that enhances our understanding of it. "We explain nature, but human life we must understand" (Dilthey, 1976, cited in van Manen, 1990, p. 4). Apart from producing a description of the quality of lived experience, it also seeks to describe the meaning of the lived experience to the actors. The product is a constructed text of human actions, behaviours, intentions, and experiences in the actors' life-world.

The preferred method of human science inquiry involves description, interpretation, and self-reflective critical analysis. It requires a phenomenological sensitivity to lived experience, to question the way we experience the world in our attempt to know the world we lived in. The act of researching is to know the world in a certain way. "A good phenomenological description is collected by lived experience and recollects lived experiences...is validated by lived experience and it validates lived experience." (van Manen, 1990, p. 27) I can only learn another person's experience through my lived experience in listening to her/his telling of it. How s/he recollects her/his lived experience in the context of telling will effectively shape what can be learned and at the same time validate her/his lived experience. Both objectivity and subjectivity will find expression in the researcher's orientated relation to the phenomenon under investigation. Objectivity is required in order that the researcher remains true to the object of inquiry—show it, describe it, and interpret it while remaining faithful to it. At the same time, the portrayal of experience is socially constructed within the framework of subjectivity. "Meaning is constructed within the

lived world of experience. We are only able to understand each other as a result of such shared meanings.” (Cohler, 1988, p. 555) Thus, intersubjectivity, or shared meanings, is essential as the foundation for all social inquiry. Negotiation of shared meaning takes place in an interview context produced by the mutual interaction between the researcher and the informant. Mishler (1986), noting “the significance of the research interview as a special context for the structure and content of interview narratives”, points out that “the interviewer’s presence as a co-participant is an unavoidable and essential component of the discourse, and an interviewer’s mode of questioning influences a story’s production” (p. 105). We need to be “strong in our orientation to the object of study in a unique and personal way” (van Manen, 1990, p. 38). Thus, research involves “an interaction, a relationship, between researcher and researched...this necessarily involves the presence of the interviewer *as a person*...the presence of the researcher’s self is central in all research” (Stanley & Wise, 1993: 160-61, cited in Miller, 2000, p. 102, emphasis original).

The activity of interpretation is an intrinsic part of human science inquiry. Researchers are “in the world of intersubjectively shared, social constructions of meaning and knowledge” (Schwandt, 1994, p. 127). To understand this world of meaning, they must interpret it, and that entails constructing the construction of the actor. However, understanding meaning is “not a methodological accomplishment, it cannot be captured in terms of procedure or method, and it is not governed by a set of criteria” (Schwandt, 1999, p. 462). It takes a process of conversational construction of reality for both parties in an interview to achieve interpretation and understanding, as a question becomes “part of a circular process through which its meaning and that of its answer are created in discourse between interviewer and respondents as they try to make continuing sense of what they are saying to each other” (Mishler, 1986, p. 53-54).

Narrative inquiry in the human sciences

Reading Clandinin & Connelly’s (1986a) work on teachers’ “personal practical knowledge” introduced me to the study of narrative and storytelling (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994). I learned that the narrative mode of knowing and representing what we know was better than the paradigmatic mode in capturing human experience (Bruner, 1986). The paradigmatic mode of thought classifies a particular instance as belonging to a category or concept according to the features or attributes that define it as an instance of a category. By contrast, narrative cognition is specifically directed to understand human actions which are unique. Whereas paradigmatic knowledge is focused on what is common among actions, narrative knowledge focuses on the

particular and special characteristics of each action. (Polkinghorne, 1995). I began to pursue the literature on narratives and narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Josselson & Lieblich, 1999; Lieblich, Tuval-Moshiach, & Zilber, 1998; Ceglowski, 1997; Chase, 1995; Hatch & Wisniewski, 1995; Cortazzi, 1993; Clandinin, 1992; Ellis & Falherty, 1992; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Van Manen, 1990; Polkinghorne, 1988). I learned that narratives, both as the object and the method of inquiry, could provide access to people's experience and the meaning they make of it because "people lead storied lives and tell stories of those lives, whereas narrative researchers describe such lives, collect and tell stories of them, and write narratives of experience" (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994, p. 416). People do not simply record their experience; they story it to give a sense of completeness in meaning. Experience becomes meaningful in the stories they live. "People live stories, and in the telling of them reaffirm them, modify them, and create new ones." (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994, p. 415)

Narrative is a form of 'meaning making'. Narrative recognizes the meaningfulness of individual experience by noting how it functions as parts to a whole. Narrative meaning is created by noting that something is a part of the whole and that something is the cause of something else. Narrative ordering makes individual events comprehensible and identify the whole to which they contribute. The ordering process operates by linking diverse happenings along a temporal dimension and identifying the effect of one event on another, according to a plot that weaves together these happenings in a single story. As a result, one's own actions, the actions of others, and chance natural happenings will appear as meaningful contributions, be it positive or negative, toward the fulfilment of a personal or social aim. The narrative scheme serves as a lens through which the apparently independent and disconnected elements of existence are seen as related parts of a whole. The whole is the discourse structure of the narrative in which human action is conferred meaning. Narrative explanation does not subsume events under laws. Instead, it explains by clarifying the significance of events that have occurred on the basis of the outcome that has followed. In other words, narrative explanation is retroactive, and it represents the person's effort to make sense of the past. Thus, narrative can retrospectively alter the meaning of events after the final outcome is known.

The production and understanding of narratives is a function of the capacity of human beings to use language that serves as the medium through which we express the world as meaningful. However, meanings of words are social constructions. Experience is an artefact of language rather than reality. It requires the presence of a hearer and speaker to jointly construct narrative meaning by drawing on communal conventions.

The study of narrative meaning requires the use of linguistic data; and linguistic statements are context-sensitive. Narrative meaning should be understood within the particular context in which the hearer and the speaker engage in the production of the narrative. Working with narrative material requires dialogical listening to three voices: (a) the narrator (recorded in tape or text); (b) the theoretical framework which provides the concepts and tools for interpretation; and (c) reflexive monitoring of the action of reading and interpretation. Narrative work requires self-awareness and self-discipline in the on-going examination of text against interpretation (Lieblich, Tuval-Moshiach, & Zilber, 1998). Analysis of linguistic data is an interpretive practice and has to make use of hermeneutic reasoning. The outcome of such analysis does not produce certain and necessary conclusions.

Polkinghorne (1988) identifies two strands of narrative research. For descriptive narrative research, the aim is to describe the narrative already held by individuals and groups and render their narrative account “as their means for ordering and making temporal events meaningful” (p. 161). The product is a document describing the narratives held in or below awareness that “make up the interpretive schemes a people or a community uses to establish the significance of past events and to anticipate the consequences of possible future actions” (p. 162). Explanatory narrative research explains through narrative why something happened. The aim is to construct a narrative account explaining ‘why’ a situation or event involving human actions has happened. The narrative account that is constructed orders and connects events in such a way as to make apparent the way they ‘caused’ the happening under investigation.

Narrative study of lives

Within the genre of narrative inquiry, there are other closely related modes of inquiry that share the same narrative root—biographic method and its variants, such as autobiography, life history, and life story (Miller, 2000; Cary, 1999; Atkinson, 1998; Clausen, 1998; Tierney, 1998; Flaherty, 1996; Gubrium, & Holstein, 1995; Mkhonza, 1995; Smith, 1994, Weiland, 1995; Kelchtermans, 1994; Freeman, 1993; Gergen, 1991; Söderqvist, 1991; Denzin, 1989; Cohler, 1988; Runyan, 1984). They share a common focus, which is to explain, describe, or reflect upon a life, thus making meaning of a person’s life historically situated in culture, time, and place.

Narrative transforms people’s life into a single unfolding and developing story in which identity work is accomplished through narrativising their life experience. (Re)Configuring personal events into a historical unity enables people to construe how

their past is related to the present, who they are and where they are heading. A life story is therefore a re-description of the lived life and a means to integrate aspects of the self. As one's life unfolds, the story about it is also open to editing and revision. People can read the events in their life from different perspectives and subject these events to various kinds of emplotment in a framework of pursuing human purposes and desires within the limits and opportunities posed by the physical, cultural, and personal environment. Narratives of people's life are not 'naturally' occurring. They are shaped, formed, told and interpreted in a broader context—personal, historical, social, institutional, and/or political. Thus, the study of lives goes beyond 'the personal'. Seen in this light, social workers' narratives of their professional career will draw on their professional discourse and reflect their perception of the 'professional landscape'.

Miller (2000) identifies three basic approaches to the biographical perspective: a realist approach that uses inductive grounded theory techniques to build theory; a neo-positivist approach that adopts the more traditional perspective of deductive theory-testing; and a narrative approach that concentrates upon the construction of viewpoints of reality that are shared between the informant and the researcher. The narrative approach was adopted in this study. The three approaches share a common theme: People already have a nascent biography as they continuously construct and reconstruct their self-view. The aim of biographical inquiry is "to discover the principles along which life histories and life stories are built in specific social and personal relations as well as in specific time and interactional contexts". (Breckner, 1998: 3; cited in Miller, 2000, p. 157)

Following Lieblich, Tuval-Moshiach, and Zilber's (1998) typology of narrative approach to the study of lives, this study fits their 'holistic-content type' since it aims to describe and explain social workers' learning and change to arrive at the current position. In the holistic approach, "the life story of a person is taken as a whole, and sections of the text are interpreted in the context of other parts of the narration" (p. 12). The researcher abstracts from the total responses of the informant a core story. S/he reads for patterns or foci of the entire story with no clear direction to begin with, and then identifies specific foci of content or theme in the light of their relative prominence or their silence in the story. However, no reading is free of interpretation since the researcher will engage in interpretation even as s/he is conducting interviews to collect narratives from informants. Reading and interpreting a life story also varies in the extent to which theoretical understanding plays a role. There are various shades of interpretive level. The bottom-line is that we always bring in our self in interpreting another person's life story. Naïve, non-judgmental reading is not possible because

“every reader is inevitably bringing her culture, language, experience and expectations into interactions, with others or with texts” (Lieblich, Tuval-Moshiach, and Zilber, 1998, p. 76). In other words, there is no ‘true’ reading. Any reading is just one possibility. However, it should not mean that anything goes. I shall address the issue of criteria for judging a particular reading of a life story towards the end of this writing process.

Research interviewing

Any person faced with relating the story of their life must edit what they tell. “Storying life is a process that takes place simultaneously against the backdrop of a biographical structure of meaning, which determines the selection of the individual episodes presented, and within the context of the interaction with a listener.” (Miller, 2000, p. 134) Storying life entails re-constructing the past. We live life forwards but understand it backwards. We choose those facets of our experience that lead to the present and render our life story coherent. Sometimes, the informant tells her/his story not so much to give data as to accomplish a certain personal identity and self-concept in a dialogical relationship with the researcher. Whilst the story selected to be told may function to present a particular image of the informant, the kind of interview the researcher undertakes may in turn affect the story told. Narratives are context sensitive, both in their telling and in the meaning they give to events, and their form and content are responsive to the aims and conditions of the interview situation (Polkinghorne, 1988).

Each interview is a production of the mutual interaction between an informant and an interviewer. In the conventional view of research interviewing, the informant is regarded as a mere ‘vessel of answers’ (Holstein & Gubrium, 1997). However, Mishler (1986) questions the view of research interviewing as a data collection method in which respondents give answers to a set of standardized questions. Rather, he sees research interviewing as a special speech event in which “both questions and responses are formulated in, developed through, and shaped by the discourse between interviewers and respondents” (p. 52). The interviewer is a co-participant in the construction of the discourse, and “an interviewer’s mode of questioning influences a story’s production” (p. 105). Thus, research interviewing is not simply information gathering. Its interactive nature “allows [researchers] to ask for clarifications, to notice what questions the subject formulates about her own life, to go behind conventional, expected answers...” (Anderson & Jack, 1991, p. 23).

In a critique of Mishler's postpositivist alternative to conventional interviewing, it is noted that "the 'reality' of interviews is much more ambiguous, relative, and unknowable than Mishler assumes", and the idea that "there is some definable or determinable thing or pattern that can be discovered through an interview interaction is more than erroneous" (Scheurich, 1997, p. 67). The author argues that "interviewees are not passive subjects; they are active participants in the interaction" (p. 71). At the core of the issue is the indeterminacy and ambiguity that lies at the heart of the interview interaction. Any reading of the interview text is loaded with the researcher's interpretive baggage. Thus, reflexivity is important to identify the baggage. Seeing informants as active participants may help researchers to be open to the indeterminacy of the research interaction. It also requires researchers to redress the power asymmetry in the research relationship that influences how both parties approach the interview situation.

Acknowledging that informants are constructors of knowledge in collaboration with interviewers, interviewing becomes "a site of, and occasion for, producing reportable knowledge" (Holstein & Gubrium, 1997, p. 114). Thus, the focus of an interview is on how meaning is constructed in a conversational medium and under what circumstances. To get to know the "real subject behind the respondent" (p. 119), the interviewer must "establish a climate for *mutual* disclosure...display the interviewer's willingness to share his or her own feelings and deepest thoughts" (p. 119, emphasis original). The authors liken an 'active interview' to an 'improvisational' performance, the production of which "is spontaneous, yet structured—focused within loose parameters provided by the interviewer, who is also an active participant" (p. 123).

Good listening is the foundation of this kind of research interviewing. The researcher needs "to be a good listener in the special way a story requires" (Coles, 1989, cited in Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 13) and "to immerse [her/himself] in the interview, to try to understand the person's story from her vantage point" (Anderson & Jack, 1991, p. 18). Being able to bracket out preconceived notions that we bring into our research enterprise is a precondition for achieving such understanding. In this connection, we need to de-privilege ourselves as the research class. Instead of imposing our categories on the research participants, we should look for "how our categories may not fit" (Steier, 1991, p. 7). We listen to them without immediately leaping to interpretations suggested by prevailing theories. "The first, and the hardest, step of interviewing was to learn to listen in a new way, to hold in abeyance the theories that told me what to hear and how to interpret what [the informants] had to say." (Anderson & Jack, 1991, p. 18) In this study, I tried to go 'native'. I did not look for 'a framework

of the study'. I kept literature review an on-going activity. I did not enter the research interviews with any theoretical pre-affiliation, other than my interest to know social workers' professional biography.

The informant's reality is jointly constructed by the interview partnership during the conduct of the interview. We have a part in the stories told in our conversational roles as questioners, listeners, and commentators. We may react to the informant or reveal personal views. At the same time, the gathering of and the reflection on narrative data of lived-experience are not separable as they are parts of the same process. We reflect with our informants as co-participants or collaborators of our research project. Given the active part we play in the interview process, reflexivity is important. We must be attentive to the influences that shape what we hear and how we interpret, and the part we play in the recollection and telling of the story. In this study, my professional biography would contribute additional space for reflecting on something in common between the two parties in the interview. My presence in the unfolding narrative was particularly salient in the second interviews where there was more mutuality in the interview process. At times, the participants' narratives were told in relation to what I had shared about my professional life.

What would constitute a truthful account is hard to tell. It depends upon the situation at the time of the interview. A life story is true in that the story the informant chooses to give at the moment of the interview is, at that place and time, the one s/he has selected as a genuine depiction of her/his life (Miller, 2000). Exposing one's self to another in the research process involves issues of trust, truth telling, authorship, and voice. Why do informants trust researchers who have the ultimate control on the story being told and own the product of the interview? Whose story is it? These are ethical considerations that beset researchers who study other people's lives.

Transcribing interview data

How to transcribe a taped interview was of methodological significance since I actually worked with the transcript rather than the interview tape. I did not find any methodological text that examined transcription as a research method in sufficient depth. I picked up the impression that transcription was unproblematic. After finding my way to transcribe the taped interviews through trial-and-error, I realized that I had in fact grappled with an important methodological decision. There were different ways to transcribe speech data, each allowed varying degrees of re-constructing and interpreting what went on in an interview. I revisited this methodological issue again in

1999 after reading the article *Transcription in Research and Practice* (Lapadat & Lindsay, 1999) in the journal *Qualitative Inquiry*. I was pleased to find that the authors also identified the same sort of issues that I had come across in the transcription process a few years ago.

Foremost is the representation issue. How can we re-present conversational events (interview) in text? A verbatim record appears to be the obvious choice, but this will preclude extra-linguistic as well as contextual information. In the final analysis, transcribing a conversational event that unfolds during human interaction from an audio- or video-taped recording can never be a reproduction of the conversational event itself. Talk is contextual. There is simply far too much contextual information for a researcher to capture, let alone to re-present. It involves selection, but the selection rules are often obscure and selectivity may even be overlooked. Thus, “transcription can never be complete or objective because the extent of detail that can be transcribed is limited both practically and theoretically” (Lapadat & Lindsay, 1999, p. 72). There is no one-to-one correspondence between a textual re-presentation of an interview and the interview itself.

The process of transcription is both interpretive (Mishler, 1991) and constructive. A transcription is only a version of the interview, an “interpretive construction arrived at through choice made by the researcher” (Lapadat & Lindsay, 1999, p. 74). The transcript is assembled by the researcher and is mediated by her/his interpretive stance. It is a re-telling of the conversational event. On the one hand, the elements of talk are lost in some ways. On the other hand, “the researcher adds to it what s/he constructs, organizes, and interprets the seen and heard discursive event for textual presentation to a new ‘Other’” (Lapadat & Lindsay, 1999, p. 76). Therefore, transcriptions are not representations but are researchers’ textual constructions of conversational events, and interpretive analysis of interview data actually begins during transcription.

Acknowledging the nature of transcriptions as interpretive constructed text of conversational events raises a number of issues: the trustworthiness of transcriptions as research data, the decision-making criteria in selecting and organizing speech data as well as the inclusion of contextual information, the positionality of the researcher that shapes her/his interpretive stance, and whose voice a transcription speaks. These issues “have to do with the ‘big questions’ about the nature of reality and how to represent it, the relationship between talk and meaning, and the place of the researcher in this interpretive process” (Lapadat & Lindsay, 1999, p. 82). To researchers, these issues boil down to one pragmatic question: “What is a useful transcription for my research

purpose?” (Kvale, 1996, cited in Lapadat & Lindsay, 1999, p. 74)

I learn from the research process that I need to be reflective about the transcription procedure and make reasoned decisions in the light of how the resulting transcription will have a part in the overall methodological design. The transcription process can facilitate close attention and hence making better sense of the narrative data. In the transcription process, I listened and re-listened to the taped interviews, attended to rhetorical devices used to tell one’s professional life, and reflected on ‘there-and-then’ thoughts and ‘here-and-now’ interpretations.

Interpreting interview texts

Given the social constructionist stance adopted, there is no fixed meaning to a person’s past. How do I make sense of the interview data then? I try to grapple with the notion of ‘data’. They are not facts even if they are statements captured in a taped interview. Rather, they are meanings constructed by another person and later interpreted by me—one reading among many. Even though “human action and interpretation are subject to many but not indefinitely many constructions” (Rabinow & Sullivan, 1979: 12, cited in Riessman, 1990, p. 230), how do I judge my own reading against alternative readings? This question points to the issue of interpretive authority. The researcher ‘I’ will invariably assume a prominent presence in any interpretive reading of an interview text since “when we do interpretations, we bring out our own knowledge, experience, and concerns to our material, and the result...is a richer, more textual understanding of its meaning” (Borland, 1991, p. 73). The “coherence of ideas rests with the analyst who has rigorously studied how different ideas or components fit together in a meaningful way when linked together” (Leininger, 1985: 60, cited in Aronson, 1994, p. 1).

There is no escape for researchers from assuming interpretive authority. I share Riessman’s (1990) ‘confession’ that “in describing patterns across the interviews, I too have constructed a text and also a context—a big picture—in which I situate and interpret individuals” (p. 230). Nonetheless, it is desirable for researchers to sensitise themselves to “the narrator’s commentary on and interpretation of a story [because it] can contribute greatly to the researcher’s understanding of it” (Borland, 1991, p. 71). We should allow room not only for our subjectivity but also the subjectivity of our research participants in the later stage of interpretation, and that implies the need on our part to “more sensitively negotiate issues of interpretive authority in our research” (p. 73). In the final analysis, our interpretation of interview texts is to be judged by our

audiences. Thus, it is good research practice to make available to them the interview texts “because other readings of them are possible” (Riessman, 1990, p. 230). I have included all the interview texts of this study in two appendix volumes.

The product of interpreting an interview text is a thematic analysis of what is revealed in that text, and that involves interpretation and organization of narrative data. “A theme is a pattern found in the information that at the minimum describes and organizes possible observations or at the maximum interprets aspects of phenomenon. A theme may be identified at the manifest level...or at the latent level. The themes may be generated inductively from the raw information or generated deductively from theory and prior research.” (Boyatzis, 1998, p. vii) Thematic analysis begins at the time of interviewing and becomes more prominent during the transcription process. It is ‘a way of seeing’ and moves through three phases: (a) recognizing an important moment (seeing); (b) encoding it (seeing it as something); and (c) interpretation.

Thematic analysis is the vital step in the research process to learn from interview texts. It can be done methodically, calling for an elaborate procedure to identify themes, generate codes, create code books, and code the interview texts (Boyatzis, 1998). I did not follow this methodical route. My approach was closer to Lieblich, Tuval-Moshiach, and Zilber’s (1998) ‘holistic-content approach’ in which a participant’s story was extracted from the interview text (see Chapter 4). In the process of composing the story, I began to notice themes emerging. In fact, a theme statement might sometimes form the storyline. Some of the themes were relevant to the object of this study but others were less so. By going through one story to another, collective themes and the patterns associated with each became identifiable. Themes that emerged from the participants’ stories could be pieced together to form a comprehensive picture of their collective experience (Aronson, 1994).

Writing self and writing others

From a social constructionist standpoint, a research cannot be separated from the researcher. Beginning from the time the research idea was conceived, we are always at the centre of the research process—selecting focus and the sort of data we collect, deciding on what to do with them, and making sense of what these data revealed to us. Research entails ‘world making’, and we are inside the world that we create. Indeed, our research tells a lot about ourselves. Thus, reflexivity is a crucial concern, not so much to keep us away from the research process, but to gauge our presence in it and what this will mean to the research methodologically.

To be reflexive means being conscious of ourselves as we see ourselves. “Our reflexivity thus reveals itself as an awareness of the recognition that we allow ourselves to hear what our objects are telling us, not by imposing our categories on them, but by trying to see how our categories may not fit...to de-privilege the research class (of which we are members) even as we continue to participate in it.” (Steier, 1991, p. 7-8) As reflexivity allows us to see how our values impose on our ‘data’, they will do so less. Writing the self in the research is a strategy to bring self-reflexivity into the research process. We write our story of the research project to acknowledge the centrality of our own experience in the research process, who we are in the field and who we are in the text. “Who the researchers are makes a difference at all levels of the research, and the signature they put on their work comes out of the stories they live and tell.” (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994, p. 423)

Whilst researching invariably means giving voice to the researcher, the latter has the ethical obligation to let the research give voices to research participants. It is desirable to construct stories from interview texts in a way that allows many voices to be heard. “Researchers now seek means of extending the platform, of admitting more voices to the conversation, and generating understanding through exposure to the first-hand accounts of people themselves”. (Gergen, 1999, p. 95) In this study, I consider it fitting to let the research participants tell their own stories of how they lived their professional life as a social worker. For this reason, I wrote all the stories (except Sally’s and Flora’s stories) in the first-person singular, as though they were speaking to the audiences through the text. However, when it came to the stage of making my sense of their stories, there was a precarious balance “to express one’s own voice in the midst of an inquiry designed to capture the participants’ experience and represent their voices, all the while attempting to create a research text that will speak to, and reflect upon, the audience’s voices” (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994, p. 423). There was “a dilemma of how lively [my] signature should be” (p. 424).

Writing research: From field text to research text

Presenting a research is part of the research itself. Research is about knowing something that is worthwhile knowing. How such knowing and the knowledge that is known are presented at the end determines how the audiences come to know my research. “Writing up our research is not a straight forward task...the form of our reports and representations is as powerful and significant as their content...writing and representing is a vital way of thinking about one’s data... Analytical ideas are developed and tried out in the process of writing and representing.” (Coffey &

Atkinson, 1996, p. 109) This quote summarizes nicely my writing experience in composing this dissertation. Writing research entails writing with the audiences in mind. In turn, deciding who we are writing for “implies decisions about what we are writing about, for what reasons, and from what perspectives” (p. 119). In the series of thematic chapters in Part III of the dissertation, writing with the audiences in mind became prominent and essential, as writing implies the establishment of a relationship between the author and the audiences, and that also implies shared knowledge and assumptions about what is relevant to the study. There were choices to be made. I could confine myself to a narrow treatment of the data. Alternatively, I could use the data as a platform to engage in a thematic discussion of broader, more general themes. The latter would mean moving farther away from the data and closer to what would be dear to me. It was up to me to shape the data in order to meet my aims and reach my audiences.

Chapter 4

Telling How I Researched

A 'Natural History' of the Research Process

"Knowing the actual unfolding process of the research is important to the understanding of the meaning of the results. Thus, it is important that the research be reported in a form that can communicate the complex and fluid unfolding of the performance." (Polkinghorne, 1997, p.12)

In the previous chapter, I have made a special note about the importance of writing research and the emphasis on "writing the self" (Coffey, 1999) as a strategy to enhance self-reflexivity in the research process. I am going to offer a methodological account in this chapter. My aim is to make the process of data collection, analysis and interpretation of data transparent. It is a confessional, reflexive account of how the research was carried out, including false leads and trials, the choices and methodological decisions made, personal reflections on conducting interviews, transforming interview data into 'stories', and analysing and interpreting these stories. In *My research journey* (Chapter 1), I noted that a research process should be uneven. The 'confessional tale' (van Maanen, 1988) in this chapter will show "the uncertainty and confusion that inevitably accompany field research" (Lareau and Shultz, 1996, 2-3; cited in Coffey, 1999, p. 117). It also serves another important purpose—to render my research study open to scrutiny and criticism by my audiences, especially the conclusions I am going to draw in the thematic chapters at the end. I am going to document the main parts of the natural history of the research process: collecting stories, re-presenting the stories, making sense of the stories, and telling what I learned from them. In so doing, I would be able to make visible personal subjectivity which may bias the account, admit my presence as an author and, hopefully, establish a claim to authenticity. "The attempt to make methodological decisions available to readers of research reports is one way of enhancing the quality of research..." (Seale, 1999, p. 177) I hope this chapter will

contribute to the quality of this research study.

Collecting stories

I contacted every participant, altogether eleven family service workers. They had earlier consented to participate in the study when a former colleague helped me to draw up the participant list. They made up a good mix of varying lengths of professional experience. All except two (Alan and Vincent) were female. The more senior ones (Sally, Iris, Alan, and Venus) had more than ten years of working experience in family service. The junior ones (Vincent, Mary, and Tracy) had worked for only two or three years. The rest (Yvonne, Michelle, Wendy, Jane and Mona) fell in between. Jane was my past student, first in our diploma programme and later in our part-time degree programme. She then found a family service job. I began to collect their stories in May 1994. I asked them two central questions: Reflecting on the past and the present, what are the changes in you as a social worker? How do these changes come about? Each participant told her/his 'story' in two or more interviews spaced over a period of two to four years or more.

My first interview was with Iris. She expected a conventional research interview. She assured me that she would try her best to answer my questions. "It sounds abstract, but what we have been talking about are concrete things." Mary also expected a conventional interview. She was surprised to learn that the interview would be a free-flowing conversation. In conducting the first series of interviews, I often mentally checked whether the conversational process stayed close to what I wanted to cover. I was fully conscious of my role as an interviewer. I was disciplined in not sharing my views and experience.

I soon discovered how different each interview could be. Iris moved between the past and the present as she narrated her professional biography. Some events in the beginning assumed a prominent place in her professional life, the meaning of which changed with the passage of time. In a reflection memo, I recorded the following impression:

Iris came across to me as an earnest and committed social worker... She narrated some key events in her professional life vividly and in great details. She managed to survive the beginning year and mature into a confident social worker... How could she bring

about such a metamorphosis? She put much emphasis on professional development...she considered it important to value continuing learning to update oneself and sustain the profession. She conveyed a strong ethical tone to me...

I interviewed Alan a week later. The interview process was very different.

Alan was a bit reserved and yet friendly. It took some time before the atmosphere loosened up... He was exceedingly polite and formal. The interview proceeded very much in a question-and-answer mode. Often, he pondered on my questions as though he was searching for an appropriate answer. Rarely did he talk about his experience. He responded in a 'sanitized' manner, generalizing from his experience without describing it.

Once I began to transcribe the interview tapes, I realized how difficult it had been for me to listen and connect the content whilst steering the conversational process. I often backtracked to something covered earlier or raised a question so vague that I could not understand it when I listened to the tape afterwards. I completed the first series of interviews by June 1994. It took me many more months to transcribe the tapes. By the time I had produced the interview records, I had a better understanding of each participant as a social worker and as a person. Indeed, there was a personality embedded in each person's narratives.

I began to interview four graduating students in September 1994 . I interviewed them two or three times in the first year of their social work career. Afterwards, I decided to include only Flora in the study for the following reasons. First, her story had a rich texture. Second, the other three students had either changed their jobs or the job nature a year later. Flora was the only one who stayed in the same job. I tracked her social work career for five years. Our last formal interview took place in March 1999, just before I began to compose this research report. I noticed a distinctive difference between a 'real-time' account (Flora's) and a retrospective account (of the family service participants). Presumably because of fading memory, the latter could convey the sentiments but much less details of past events and experiences in the beginning year. Thus, including Flora's 'real-time' account of beginning practice proved to be a good methodological decision.

Tracking the informants over a five-year span

I arranged the second series of interviews with the family service participants two to four years later for two purposes: first, to reflect on the first story and, second,

to listen to their continuing stories. Spacing the two interviews a few years apart would highlight the changes in their life with the passage of time. They would attend more to these changes after talking about their professional biography in the first interview.

Wendy had migrated to Canada and Tracy had left the agency. I could not reach them. I decided to exclude them from this study. Venus declined to be interviewed because she could not afford the time, but agreed when I contacted her again six months later. In continuing their stories, many participants went through a life review, for these stories were about their personal life as much as about their professional career. Some told me a new version of social work. In fact, it was the old one taught in their initial social work education. They had re-discovered the long heritage of social work as a caring profession.

I chose to begin the second series of interviews with Sally because I was interested in following through the stage-progression account of her professional life described in the first interview. She talked about how the experience of loss, pain, separation, and death in her personal life had enriched her capacity to understand her clients. She had re-discovered the essential nature of social work. It was not about playing a 'power game' to change clients, but about listening and understanding their experience and the meaning they made of it.

Iris had been promoted to a supervisory post not long ago. Being a beginner again, she was going through the same kind of anguish and self-doubt experienced at the start of her social work career. She treated me as her confidant as she explored a recurrent life theme in her current experience as a frontline supervisor.

Alan was about to make a mid-life career change. He had serious thoughts about leaving the social work profession, but was not sure whether it was just another call for him to revive his social work career.

Venus vented her discontent towards new managerial initiatives. She was entering into her mid-life career at a time when social work became less promising. She was cynical, but her commitment to a helping profession had never wavered. Within the small niche of her practice world, she tried to preserve the version of good social work that she had long cherished.

Yvonne re-visited her first story, wherein she re-discovered the 'foundation' of social work and a recurrent life theme—subserviance to authority and insecurity. As a mother of two children, she felt the constraints on a women's professional career. She would like to pursue continuing professional education, but she could not afford to compromise her family role.

Like Sally and Yvonne, Michelle had revised her conception of social work. She renounced professional power. She realized that what mattered was not the therapy employed, but "our attitude and faith on people".

Mary had also changed her conception of practice. Previously, she strove for the mastery of therapy models. Now, she emphasized "being with clients and my attitude in relating to them". She began to see the profound meaning of 'understanding' another person. She was mindful of her capacity to understand.

In his first story, Vincent stressed the importance of social workers formulating a perspectival view because the 'how' could be improvised on that basis. He did not privilege the professional knowledge taught in social work education. Instead, he subscribed to a 'pragmatic epistemology'—anything, including common sense, goes if it works. However, he revised his position in the second story. He came to see the importance of formal knowledge. In this regard, his story followed a different storyline compared with other family service participants.

Mona had changed her job several times after our first interview. She began to work part-time after giving birth to her first child to accommodate her family role. I decided to drop her story.

Changing character of the research relationship

I had revised my approach to interviewing by the time I conducted the second series of interview with the family service participants. Earlier, I had read Mishler's (1986) work on research interviewing and accepted his idea that an interview is a product of co-construction arising from a conversational process between an interviewer and an interviewee. When the object of inquiry was another person's life narrative, it would be better if I immersed myself in the conversational process as a

co-participant rather than steering it through topics and questions of my own choice. Any topic of significance to the narrator would emerge in the process, as s/he was not a disinterested observer of her/his own (professional) life.

I entered into these interviews with no specific topics in mind, except for a review of the content of the last interview and subsequent changes since then. Whilst there was uncertainty as to what would emerge in the interview, I became more spontaneous and relaxed during it. The first interview in this series (the second interview with Sally) was a powerful experience. I was confident that I could conduct other interviews in the same manner, always counting on my interest in knowing the other person's professional life. I also experienced a qualitative change in my relationship with the participants, as though I had known them for a long time. There was greater mutuality in our conversation. We shared our life (both personal and professional), our frustration and hope, our commitment to social work and the fear of losing it. It did not occur to me, as it did in the first interviews, that it would be improper for me to volunteer self-disclosure. I was aware of the issue of social desirability and identity management in research interviewing, but they would matter only in a paternalistic research relationship. In a genuine joint inquiry, I accept the ethics of mutuality in a conversation on another social worker's life, as I am also a social worker. My professional biography would give additional space to our reflective discussion on something in common. I experienced these interviews somewhat like a reunion with old friends. They had told me their past stories. I wanted to know the changes in their lives since we last met.

What would count as data? Interpreting experience and constructing meaning

I began to notice the narrative quality of these interviews soon after I had conducted the first one with Iris. Many participants were good storytellers. Iris recalled her beginning year as though she was re-living it in the present. It was a tough beginning for her, yet she storied it as something good to her professional career. I became uncertain how to 'read' the interview data. They were bound in time and context—the interview context and her life context. What should count as data? Would it be the tough beginning, her experience at that time, the meaning in the

‘past-presence’, or the meaning in the ‘present-presence’?

This methodological issue became even more conspicuous by the time I embarked on the second series of interviews. Several participants reflected on the changes since our last interview, as though they were comparing two snapshots of their life spaced apart in time. Invariably, they found changes. However, apart from these changes, they also changed the way they read their first stories, giving different meanings and even re-telling them differently. The study became a part of their professional life. It gave them a unique opportunity to tell and re-tell their professional biography, allowing them to re-shape their identity as a social worker in the process. “This is in much the same way that a good social worker allows a client the opportunity to make sense of their continuous experience.” (Professional Parsloe, personal communication)

If there is no fixed meaning given to a person’s past, how do I make sense of the interview data? Complicating the matter further, data are not simply statements captured in an interview tape. They were meanings constructed by a participant and later interpreted by me. It would be just one way among many to read a person’s narrative. Furthermore, I played a substantial part in constructing the person’s narrative in the interview.

Converting taped interviews into textual accounts

Soon after the interview with Iris (the first interview in this study), I tried to produce a textual account of it. I wrote from memory the conversational content covered in the interview. It captured my reflection and interpretation on prominent themes, but it could hardly be a re-presentation of the interview. A week later, I tried to transcribe the taped interview. In the process, I picked up finer details and recognized breaks and repetitions in the conversational flow. I also faced several methodological questions. Should I transcribe the taped interview word by word or record the conversation in my own words? Should I record my ‘there-and-then’ thoughts and reflection during the interview, or my ‘here-and-now’ thoughts and reflection listening to the tape? At that time, I had not come across any methodological discussion on transcribing speech data into text.

After a trial attempt to produce verbatim records, I found it difficult to follow and understand a conversation in text. It was like reading broken phrases. It was much harder to comprehend the meaning of speech acts in text than in a conversational context. Thus, I dropped the idea of re-presenting the interviews verbatim. Next, I tried another textual style—a narrative account that chronicled the conversational flow in the interview, preserving the speech data at some significant points to retain the participant's voice and reveal my part in co-constructing the on-going narrative. Understandably, translating speech data from Cantonese to English would mean transforming it. It was difficult to retain the flavour of a Cantonese conversation in its English translation, although I had exercised great care in the choice of words and expressions. The following research memo captures my deliberation on this process.

The final version of the interview record is the third-generation version. I produced the first-generation version in this manner: I listened to the tape and then described the context in a part narrative, part verbatim record. Apart from converting speech into text and translating it into English, there was not much deliberation in the process. However, I did make a conscious attempt to bring in 'there-and-then' reflection and my experience during the interview. At some points, I also recorded my 'here-and-now' reflection. In the end, I produced a first-person narrative account of the interview. After completing the narrative account, I got a clearer mental representation of the interview, much better than the one picked up immediately after it. This first-generation version furnished the raw data for later analysis. I preferred this to a 'high-fidelity' verbatim record. A verbatim record will render the interaction more transparent to my readers, except for one caveat—words in a conversation are not the same as words in text. The latter is not even a true re-presentation of communicative action. A verbatim record will render my presence invisible except for the words I uttered. Readers will not have access to how I made sense of a participant's (Sally) account and my thoughts about her experience in the moment-to-moment flow of the interview process. This is not a good option since I am not interested in studying the communicative action in an interview. The study is about her experience in being and becoming a social worker. I am interested in her account and the sense I make of it. It is an account of her lived experience as well as my thoughts, reflections, and feelings about it. The subjective dimension is important. It will be lost if I only record the uttered words. By contrast, a narrative account of the interview brings to the fore my subjective experience. For the same reason, I make a deliberate attempt to bring in my 'there-and-then' reflection and experience. Some of these entries are about my process reflection and observation—how the interview is going, when to raise a new topic, when (not) to probe, etc. Other entries are about my reflection, sometimes opinionated, on the participant's narrative of her professional life. I also see the value of preserving her words as closely as possible to what and how they were actually said. Even though it is my narrative account of the interview, embedded in it is Sally's account of her lived experience. Whilst speaking my voice in the narrative account of the interview, I wish to speak hers also in the study. In the first-generation version, I reproduced her words in direct quotes, although I am the person who determined what to include.

Translating a conversation in Chinese into a text in English is another problematic

issue. Finding the right word and the right expression is a translator's craft, not mine. There are many instances when I am not sure what the right word or expression should be. For example, 'seeing life as it is' is a poor translation for 'peng cheng xin'. Sentence structure is another concern. Cantonese is a spoken dialect. I had to change the sequence of broken phrases to render the translated text readable. In such instances, I was particularly concerned about the possibility of unwittingly altering the meaning or the emphasis of Sally's narrative. However, the problem of translation paled in comparison with the problem in re-presenting or reproducing a conversation in a textual account. Speech acts in a conversation are always richer in embedded and expressed meaning than a textual account of them. Sometimes, these meanings are quite accessible to a native speaker who is a party in the conversation. Sometimes, they are not, and any uncovered meanings can only be a product of interpretation. I think reporting these uncovered meanings is important for the readers to acquire a fuller meaning of Sally's voice, which I tried to render audible in my narrative account of the story she told.

Transforming qualitative data

The stack of interview records (my narrative accounts) constituted the raw data that I worked on to extract the participants' stories and the meanings they revealed. I had consulted several methodological texts on the task of transforming qualitative data (Boyatzis, 1998; Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Silverman, 1993, 1997; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Wolcott, 1994). I heeded the advice that "the analyst should always be reflexive and critical...there should be a constant dialogue between the researcher and the data, so should there be the internal dialogue of reflection on the part of the analyst..." (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996, p. 190). Initially, I tried to conduct thematic coding of the interview data in a methodical manner. However, I soon discovered that this procedural route had focused my attention on coding expressions, but little comprehension of what the participant had tried to convey. It was like working on parts in isolation from the whole.

I improvised another procedure to recover the participant's narrative embedded in our conversation. I numbered the lines of the interview record. Then I drew up a summary table to re-organize the textual content under thematic headings. Realizing that transposing material from one part of the account to another part might lead to distortion of meaning, I kept the sequencing of these thematic headings as close as possible to the actual chronological order of their location in the conversational process. However, rarely did a conversational flow follow a linear structure. Nor did it cohere well. Therefore, I had to exercise my judgment when the same thematic content appeared in several parts of the interview but in a somewhat different context.

In the process, I began to notice convergence in thematic content amongst the interviews. There were also changes in personal meaning when the same theme was raised in the second interview.

After completing this procedure of drawing up summary tables for the interview records, I had acquired a vague sense of the phenomenon. However, I did not experience any strong personal involvement during the process. I was working on some interview data, but I had not 'lived' through the experience of another person. I decided to re-compose the interview record in two ways. First, I re-organized the conversational flow according to the thematic structure revealed in the summary table. Second, I re-composed the narratives in a manner upholding the ethic of (re)presenting participants' voices in research writing. Around that time, I was reading feminist and postmodern writings on notions such as voice, power, authorship, reflexivity, collaboration in social research, the constructive nature of reality, and textual devices to represent as much as to distort (Ribbens & Edwards, 1998; Scheurich, 1997; Tierney & Lincoln, 1997; Morse, 1994). I was interested in finding alternative styles of research writing that would express the voice of both the participants and the researcher (Banks & Banks, 1998; Hertz, 1997; Noris, 1997; Golden-Biddle & Locke, 1997; Ely, Vinz, Downing, & Anzul, 1997; Krieger, 1991).

I decided to adopt two textual styles in writing the participants' stories, in the light of how these stories would make up the research report. I presented Sally's stories first, followed by Flora's. In both cases, I wrote about their stories as an invisible author to distance myself from their stories before weaving in a thematic discussion of each case. The latter serves as a scaffold for an emergent perspective to study the stories of other participants later. For the rest of the stories, I decided to write in first-person narratives, partly "voicing the text" (Coffey, 1999), giving voices to the participants, and partly to enable me to empathize with their experience. I tried this textual style with Iris's story first, and experienced for the first time how writing could enable me to enter into another person's world.

I had been reflecting on my own writing experience during the process of re-writing Iris's story. What is it like to tell another person's story in a first-person narrative? I contrasted it with my experience in writing Flora's story. I presented Flora's story in the manner of my own narrative account. In other words, I was telling

my story of what I had learned about her professional life. Her story was embedded in my narrative. Contrast this with writing Iris's story; a salient difference was the 'bracketing out' of my self. At times, I was absorbed in it and had access to her subjectivity. The 'I' was always present in writing Flora's story. I was attending to both what she told and how I would interpret her narrative. At the same time, I was reflecting on some emerging themes, presumably because I had distanced myself more from her account when it was written from my positional view.

The stories that you are going to read in the following chapters are textual products of my making. From speech data recorded in interview tapes to written accounts of these stories, I have brought the interview data through several cycles of transformation. Invariably, this entailed decisions on what to tell and how to tell it, as well as the textual style to present it. The following research memo on writing Sally's stories describes the 'representational crisis':

The final version of the interview record preserves the actual conversational flow as well as the participant's voice. I have 'smoothed' the narrative extensively to give my readers a better sense of how the interview was conducted and what was said, when, and in what context. Readers will pick up some salient points, but an interview account that preserves a high fidelity of the actual interview process does not tell a story, even though a story is embedded in it. A close reading of the interview record will find many 'not-quite-identical' repetitions, frequent backtracking but in more details, and moving back and forth in time. It does not provide the coherence of a good story about a person's experience. I have tried to do some 'cut-and-paste' work to move parts of the interview record around, but the re-constructed record still appears haphazard to me. I now conclude that it will require more than 'cut-and-paste' work to convert an interview account into a story. It will be an exercise of emplotment. I prepare to assume the responsibility of emplotment since the study entails re-telling the stories of my research participants. I am going to be a co-author of their stories. However, there can be many ways to emplot a person's story. How can I tell which one is better, and better in what way?

What do the stories tell? How do I tell after listening to the stories?

What a story tells is embedded in its plot. The act of emplotment incorporates my interpretation of what the interview data tell. I processed the first series of interviews to map the thematic universe. However, after interviewing Sally again two years later, I began to re-think the whole issue of data analysis again. Her first story could no longer stand alone because it dissolved into a larger story that had re-configured its meaning. Not only had the optimism about her ability to predict, master and control the helping process become part of an old script, it also assumed

new meanings in the larger story. If there were a larger story to tell, it makes little sense to construct a story destined to be abandoned. But what am I going to do with the larger story? A ready answer is to make my own sense of it, and that means teasing out significant findings for this study. If I aim at answering a global question “How do social workers develop over time after embarking on their social work career?”, the answer will lie in the larger story, albeit in an implicit way.

I have some other questions in mind: How do we understand the phenomenon of professional learning and change in social workers’ professional life? How do individuals regenerate and reproduce social work in the process of pursuing professional learning and change? The larger story falls short of furnishing a ‘second-order understanding’ of the phenomenon. For the purpose of constructing an evolving discourse on the phenomenon of professional learning and change, I need to tease out the hidden, embedded, implicit meanings in the stories, reflect on what they tell, draw out pertinent themes and examine each in a reflective-analytical discussion. Thus, it is necessary to study each story, first at the time it was told, and later in its re-telling and in the context of a larger story.

Next, I faced another issue: How do I construct and write a reflective-analytical discussion on each of the themes captured in a story? This question leads to two further questions: How do I identify these themes through reading and re-reading these stories? How do I present and connect the thematic discussion on one story to that of another story, as well as the corpus of literature? This last question holds far-reaching implications for the shape and structure of the research report.

When I first coded the first interview text (Sally’s), the themes in her narrative were self-evident to me. For instance, she brought up the notion of ‘path’ in describing her social work career. This notion presented itself as an important theme. I also identified second-order themes. For example, the ‘path’ of a social work career led me to the notion of ‘professional development as a process’ and the conceptualization of a ‘developmental trajectory’. These second-order themes had their roots in my biographical experience as well as what I had picked up from literature review. ‘Professional development as a process’ is one of the orienting concepts in this study. It resonates with my own sense of professional development in this research journey. How I read the participants’ stories and what I learned from

them have shaped the way I look at social work and social work education.

Along the way in this research journey, I had explored a huge expanse of intellectual terrain. Whilst the stories steered the direction of the literature review, what I read in turn fed back to the study. For instance, I picked up from *The Evolving Professional Self* (Skovholt & Rønnestad, 1995) some sensitizing concepts for reading the stories and what these stories revealed. The book is about a research study of the professional development of therapists and counsellors over the life span. It depicts a number of trajectories that veteran counsellors passed through, each leading to a different end state: stagnation, pseudo-development, and professional individuation through continuing professional reflection. When I read Sally's story, I tried specifically to look for narrative data indicating the feeling of stagnation — and I could find it.

Sally's story furnished the platform for anchoring the abstract language of theoretical/research literature to the realm of lived experience. However, an even more important contribution of this study is to add to the discourse, critique it, and create new space. I began the research journey with no clear mapping of the theoretical universe or a clear theoretical framework. This was a strategy by design to avoid fitting the interpretation of lived experiences to some impersonal concepts and abstract theoretical schemes (Ellis & Bochner, 1992). Too many theories upfront would constrain what the stories might tell. By reading along the way, I had sustained a continuous dialogue between data and ideas that fuelled the thematic discussion at the end of each story and what I learned from them in the thematic chapters.

Writing, re-writing, and a work in progress

I have always kept in mind that composing the research report goes beyond presenting what I did and what I learned in this research study. Writing is not simply an integral part of the research process (Wolcott, 1990), what is written and how it is written constitute the research study itself. Thus, I approached the writing task with care and a spirit of experimentation. In a personal communication with my wife, I frame the issue in this way:

I am not sure how best to write Sally's experience and her life... I need to address a methodological issue... What I have in mind now is to do some experimental writing

on her story, to play around with styles and emphases. Hers is an important story in this study-to anchor the main thrust of the study and lead to other stories. How I write a story and sequence the stories in the research report is important. (Personal communication, 25/03/1999)

A few days later, I sounded out some initial thoughts on the writing task in two separate personal communications:

I am going to present to my readers what the research process is like to construct a story of a participant's professional life in meticulous details, and how I come to know something through studying this story... Readers will have a close reading of Sally's story and the research process. The thematic discussion ending this part will serve as a backdrop for reading the stories of other participants and a platform for raising further thematic discussion to round up each story, to add on and expand the one offered in the context of reading Sally's story.... I may group the stories into parts based on some prominent themes...to introduce a greater sense of order to the readers and to foreground these themes. The ending chapters forming the last part of the report will give a synthesis, bringing together the stories in a grand narrative of what it is like and what it is about to become a social worker after a person entered into a social work career. I am going to expand on the themes of personal significance to me as a social work teacher and of importance to the professional community. I am going to situate one chapter on social work education, another on professional learning and change as a personal as well as a collective drama that gives shape to the social work being practised by social workers. (Personal communication with Professor Parsloe, 28/03/1999)

After putting the last full-stop at the end of this report, I should write a postscript to give a honest appraisal of how this study is not only valuable to me but also to the readers of the report-social work students, social work teachers, frontline practitioners and supervisors, social work administrators, and people who are interested in the education of professionals. (Personal communication with Professor Parsloe, 1/04/1999)

As I soon found out, these were indeed initial thoughts. About the time (around September 1999) I was to produce the first draft of the report, I realized that I should have been writing a dissertation instead of a research report. There was a word limit for a Ph.D. dissertation. In the remaining months before the submission deadline (January 2000), I tried desperately to downsize the manuscript by more than half. Admittedly, the downsizing had seriously undermined the integrity of the research study. One more thing that I learned about writing a dissertation is to observe the convention of the academic community. Writing a dissertation is not a good arena for experimental writing. Writing in a consistent textual style renders it easier for readers to read. Tightening up the presentation on what the research is about and the methodology adopted is preferred over a fluid description of how I came to formulate the study and find the ways to carry it out.

I am going to bear this in mind in re-writing this dissertation, maintaining a balance between following the convention whilst still preserving what I have read about good qualitative research writing. This is still a work in the making. Writing is a creative process. I can only give form and content to my dissertation inside the writing process.

PART II

STORIES LIVED AND TOLD

Chapter 5

Sally, Re-visioning Social Work

I chose to write Sally's story first because it is very moving; it sets the tone of this study, and it gives a portrait of the "developing social worker" and how s/he goes about constructing social work in her/his professional life. Her first story influenced me strongly. Second story opened up a way of looking at social work. It gave a graphic image of a 'developing social worker' who embraced the faith and values that social work had long stood for. The way Sally lives her professional life enshrines what is good about social work. After listening to her story, I have come to see social work not so much as technological progress (our new-age worship of therapies and techniques) as common humanity that re-confirms its moral-ethical character. Sally has restated social work as caring practice. She was taught these values as a social work student. It took her over ten years of continuous professional reflection (Skovholt & Rønnestad, 1995) to re-discover what these values stand for in the making of social work.

I learned from listening to Sally's story what 'constructing social work' means to me. Previously, I saw this from an epistemological standpoint (see Chapter 2)—how social workers produce a form of knowledge appropriate to their activity in and through practice. However, Sally's story suggests a more fundamental aspect of "constructing social work". She embodies virtues and wisdom in her way of knowing and acting in practice. Her strong commitment to life-long learning welds together her professional and personal life. It is not simply about learning some therapy models; it is learning grounded in her practice experience and in her reflection and analysis of that experience.

How will social work re-create and re-produce itself? What will social work become if Sally personifies what social workers are? What will social work practice be like for the social worker and the client?

* * * * *

Sally was the most experienced practitioner amongst the family service participants. I was interested in studying her professional biography to find out how a beginner became a competent practitioner. In the first interview, she storied her social work career as a series of stage-progressions. Her “path” traversed three stages.

The Path to Mastery

7th June 1994

The “feeling-my-way” stage spanned the first six months. She tried to survive the job in the midst of emotional distress and self-doubt because she was unable to “connect theories with practice” and “apply what I had learned” from her social work education. She was dissatisfied with her practice because, apart from the “client-centred stuff”, she was not familiar with other approaches. She was “doing the same thing regardless of the nature of a client’s problem”—she listened, reflected on what the client had said, and offered her insight to the client. Very often, she talked “much more than the client but with no clear focus”. In the end, she did not feel she had accomplished much, although the client “wasn’t too frustrated”. She was not satisfied with this impoverished way of practice because, according to the principle of individualization, she should not give “the same medicine to every client”. When a case “didn’t conform to the ‘client-centred’ type”, she did not know what else she could do. However, she could not get help from other people. Whilst depressed by this predicament—“my heart sank into a pit”—she tried to “find new things” to make her practice more effective because of her commitment to “help clients better”. Looking for “a way out” marked her entry into the next stage—the “study” stage.

Professional learning was a prominent theme in the “study” stage. The supervisor was not very helpful apart from giving advice on procedures. For micro-skills in interviewing clients, she had to consult professional peers. Listening to their practice stories helped. However, professional peers could not teach her the knowledge she needed to guide her intervention. She began to enrol in in-service courses in the hope of finding theories and practice approaches to “give me the

direction and methods” to help clients. These long, intensive courses were useful: she could find “things that really work”. Also, these courses opened up a body of literature previously unknown to her. Gradually, she regained confidence in making “the connection between theories and practice”. She also discovered that reading was “the quick way” to learn. Within six months, she was able to learn from her practice, “a process of growth through making mistakes”. She “became more reflective” when she came across difficult situations and looked for alternative ways to “handle things better”. By the end of the first year, she had settled into the job.

However, her life became difficult again in her second year of practice. The supervisor gave her more difficult cases. Again, she did not know what to do. Reading did not help. Consulting professional peers did not help. She began to experience an acute sense of inadequacy again and a feeling of stagnation. She thought about leaving the job and even social work altogether if she would not make a good social worker. She felt an urge to look for “something new, something I could try” because “I shouldn’t stop at this level”. Facing the “second crisis point” in her professional life, she reviewed her commitment to social work and emerged with a new resolve “to deepen myself and take risks in trying things out”. Around that time, she was on an in-service training course. Here she found “the directions in counselling and managing cases, perspectives for looking at a case, analysis and treatment”. The trainer in this course became her professional elder. She could seek advice from him. She decided to enrol in postgraduate study “to deepen myself”. This was an important decision in her professional life. It also marked the beginning of the third stage—the “deepening” stage.

She had a rewarding experience studying alongside classmates who were mostly experienced social workers and contributed a rich stock of practice experience. This meant that the quality of learning was “more down-to-earth, with greater clarity, and better connected to practice”, contrasting with the abstract, conceptual stuff of little practical meaning she had picked up from her initial social work education. In one course, she learned “the ‘how’ of casework”. She observed “what to do in each step” by watching video or live demonstrations by the teacher. So it was like “following a coach” to learn “what to do and why” in a concrete context guided by a framework of practice. She became “more familiarized” with the

theories. Gradually, she acquired “a growing sense of self-assurance” and noticed “some changes in practice”. She even invented a classification scheme, which gave her “a quicker way to identify the general direction (to work) and predict what the outcome will be”.

She found herself becoming “sharper in discriminating the goals that would be good and the steps to take”. She also made “frequent predictions” and was right “most of the time”. Indeed, she likened practice to “a power game”. She could win with “a sense of power and credibility”. “If I am successful, the client will follow my words... Some clients...will not listen unless they have full confidence in us.” In the past, she used to be “led by the client”. Now she became “more focused and directive”. She would ask “relevant questions” and avoid “dwelling too much on listening”. She was able to adjust “the pace and the focus to suit different personalities and cases”. Her practice was eclectic, using a framework of integrated elements drawn from several practice models. She was now more familiar with these models after “working them out in practice, examining what has happened and reflecting on what I have found”, recognizing what was common amongst them. Thus, she revised her previous view that practice should correspond directly with theory. She became pragmatic and did what might work best. “How we practise is unrelated to what we have learned. Training may have shaped the way we think about practice. However, once in the field, we would be able to tell whether something works or not.”

Sally was happy with her present job although it meant “hard work and great demand”. She was pleased to find herself more competent and “more confident with some cases” because she had developed “routines in dealing with these cases” and was able to tell “intuitively whether or not I can help a client”. She would adapt to the outcome the client expected, even if it differed from her clinical judgment. When she was a beginner, she thought she was “a superman...capable of doing anything”. Now that she was more experienced, she realized that “there is limit to what I can possibly accomplish”.

My reflection on Sally's first story

Sally evoked the 'path' metaphor to describe her social work career. She gave a stage-progression account of how she came to be a competent social worker, complete with a label for the central theme of each stage. She overcame defeats and disillusion in beginning practice, immersed in learning projects, and finally attained a state of mastery—a confident practitioner always in control of what she was doing. She projected an image of an expert practitioner. If there is a 'path' leading to mastery, social work teachers should prepare their students for the journey down this path. In this story, professional development as stage-progressions is a substantive concept in the lived experience of a social worker. It matches the 'stage model' of professional development that dominates the literature.

A beginner's experience

The 'feeling-my-way' stage is a period of 'survival'. As a beginner, Sally had to grapple with a new job and a social work practice in the real world. Her preoccupation was about how to practise—unable to use theories, not knowing what to do, doing the same thing all the time, being led by her clients and ineffective. She displayed an egoistic, self-centred bias in making sense of her experience. She could have framed the difficulty in using theories and individualizing her practice as practice issues that practitioners (even experienced ones) would face. However, she attributed these to her inadequacy as a social worker, but she could do little to improve her practice. Because of the insular nature of family service practice, the 'oral tradition' (Pithouse, 1987) in a social work office provides beginners with the only access to their colleagues' practice. However, this will always be ad hoc and fragmented. Initial social work education shaped the way Sally approached beginning practice. Social work students practise according to some frameworks. They accept the primacy of theories and judge their performance in terms of effectiveness even though they are inexperienced beginners. However, most beginners will fail in all these accounts. Sally would not be the exception.

Learning on the job in beginning practice

Beginners need to learn on the job. Learning on the job is intrinsic to a

beginner's experience. It took Sally six months to familiarize herself with the job and get by with it. Thereon she entered into the 'study' stage—a period of intensive pursuit for professional learning. What did she learn? How did she learn? These are questions pertaining to our understanding of the phenomenon of professional learning and change in the early years of a social work career. Sally wanted to learn more theories and practice approaches, things taught in initial social work education. She was looking for directions and methods that would render her practice more effective. This orientation to professional learning reflects the technical rationality underlying professional practice that social work education perpetuates. Sally learned in three ways: consulting professional peers, reading, and on in-service training courses. The latter was the major avenue for learning theories and practice approaches. If this is what beginners want to learn, continuing professional development activities will be an extension of initial social work education. However, learning a theory will not be of much help until and unless a beginner makes conscious attempts to use it and learn from her/his 'trail-and-error' experience. S/he is then learning the practice of that theory, not the theory itself. The distinction is important. Sally described it as "working out a theory"—unpacking a theory whilst using it and re-packing the theory in post-action reflection on her experience. In the process, she reflected on her experience in difficult situations and looked for alternative ways. This mode of learning resonates with Schön's (1983) 'reflection-in-action' and 'reflection-on-action'. In the end, she transformed a theory into an action schema in her own practice.

The threat of premature closure and stagnation

Social workers may face the threat of premature closure of professional development or stagnation at some points of their professional life. Sally could have settled into the job at the end of the beginning year. It would lead to a premature closure of professional development if she could get by with routinized practice. Things had become so predictable that she might have an illusion of mastery. Learning would become redundant. Nor would she perceive the need to learn. She would overlook new experience or perceive it through old lenses. She would reach a state of pseudo-development (Skovholt & Rønnestad, 1995). However, she sensed the need to learn when she was unable to cope with difficult cases new to her, where

resources used in the past did not help. Feeling stagnant and losing confidence again, she seriously considered quitting social work if she would not make a good social worker. Her resolve to look for something new again in another cycle of intensive pursuit of professional learning came from her commitment to be a good social worker. It was her prime moving force.

Continuous professional development

Sally went on to search for a framework of practice that would provide her with the direction and way to practise. It is like searching for the 'Holy Grail' that will enable a person to practise in the right way. Finding it is the end of the path. She found the 'Holy Grail' in the 'deepening' stage—a framework of practice that prescribes professional action. After drilling herself in this framework of practice for some time, she attained a semblance of expert practice, as conveyed in the 'power play' metaphor. She was able to accomplish what she wanted with technical prowess. Apart from attaining a state of mastery, there were also a number of significant changes in the 'deepening' stage: she formulated her personal model of practice; she was able to integrate theories to construct an overarching framework in her personal model; she moved from a theoretically driven kind of knowing to an intuitive, situational kind of knowing; she embraced a pragmatic epistemology, acting in the light of what had worked in her practice experience; and finally, she accepted the existence of limits to what she could accomplish as a social worker. These changes were products of a process of continuous professional development. She had continued to learn from her practice experience.

By the 'deepening' stage, Sally had attained the zenith of professionalism. This stage might well be the final stage of her developmental trajectory, save for the refinement and deepening of her professional 'know how'. However, it is paradoxical to postulate a state of mastery as the end when a process of continuing professional development is still going on. So long as she continues to reflect on her practice and pick up new ideas from in-service training courses, she will be able to continue creating practice knowledge of her own. The second story would show this was indeed the case.

* * * * *

Sally was still working in the same office when I had the second interview with her two-and-a-half years later. In the continuing story, she had come to a very different conception of social work. She re-confirmed the noble heritage of social work. She personified the breed of social workers who give dynamism to social work as a lived practice.

Re-discovering Old Wisdom; Regenerating a Living Practice

25th February 1997

Sally declared she had out-grown the stage she was in last time. She was not concerned about applying theories and therapy models anymore. Although she had more theories in stock now, she would “bracket out theories” first. She would listen to the client first instead of following a framework. “I put the client most important, more important than theories.” Her foremost concern was “whether the client needs support, hope or solution”. In the past, she overlooked the difficulty of listening to clients because she “lacked experience” and “was too involved solving problems”. However, with more practice experience, she began to appreciate the importance of understanding “what the client’s experience is like”. In one case she refused to act as guarantor for an elderly client’s funeral expenses without giving any excuse. She did not worry that the client might consider her unhelpful. In the past, she would have explained why she was not able to help. In another case she advised a woman who wanted to divorce her husband because he no longer loved her, “It takes two people to make a marriage. Love is not unilateral, something you only demand your husband to give.”

In neither example did Sally follow the ‘standard way’ to handle such situations, where there is a risk of being rejected by the client. “I am being myself and this is the difficulty I perceive... I am just being human.” In the beginning, she did not relate to clients like this. “I was too preoccupied with how others would look at me.” Now she could relate genuinely. “It needs immersion.” It was the growth of life experience that changed her approach to practice, “after going through so many things in life—

death, separation, loss, pain, marriage, parenthood". She had gained a deeper view of life, and that enabled her to "see things in multiple ways, in a richer and broader perspective". She came to grips with the meaning of acceptance in helping. "We have to be rational, but we are human beings too. We don't do things just because it is right. We need to see things in another person's frame..."

Now she valued experience more than theories. "Theories don't tell what being human is". Sensitivity in understanding human experience "has nothing to do with theories". "I focus on what clients told me (and) convey my understanding to them." In this new version of practice, "the new element is the way to understand clients, to know whether they need support or are ready for change, whether the groundwork has been laid down..." The theory of action was still about influence: "I can help clients see things in a different light at the right time... The client is open to other versions and no longer sticks to a one-dimensional mind-frame..." It may sound like the 'power play' metaphor in the first story, but there is a clear distinction: "It isn't that you fill the client with your life experience (because) it would 'leak'." She realized that it would be futile to impose her perspective on the client. Instead, she strove for "feeling with the client, intuitive knowing and understanding". She would have "a part in the client's meaning-making (because) the conversation is co-created". In her view, there is artistry in social work.

It involves something human, knowing intuitively what will be good for the client even if she may not think so, and telling her straight away. Such knowing is not informed by something. I simply know it intuitively...if I have a deep concern for the client, I would just tell her what I have in mind, tell her my intuition. Of course, I am sure that the client can take it. This is art. There is no step to follow.

She acquired this view from "direct experience in working with clients". Theories could not tell her what to do. In fact, she questioned the wisdom of teaching heavy doses of theory and the technical aspect of practice because they gave students "a false impression of having good command of these techniques such that they may use them indiscriminately". "It is dangerous to practise according to a theory in a mechanical way, as though we can follow steps and procedures." She now believed that a practitioner's human qualities mattered more than technical competence. "A good person is better than a trained social worker who doesn't have the heart for clients and treats them as objects." In her view, "being ethical' and "valuing clients as a person (instead of as an object to be manipulated)" were important qualities in a

social worker.

However, she did not mean to devalue the role of theories in practice. She used theories as “multiple lenses” for achieving an understanding of a client. After laying down “the groundwork” through listening for understanding, she would employ these theoretical lenses to guide her “when to attend to what”. She would not bind herself to a particular theory. Nor would she determine ahead which theory to use. Rather, the choice “depends on what will fit the client”. Thus, learning theories is still the prerequisite, indeed “the more theories the better”. In the past, she was inexperienced. Therefore, she was unable to “absorb” these theories, let alone apply them in practice.

It took more than experience for her to master the artistry of practice. She had to make a “deliberate effort” to acquire the art of listening for understanding. In the last two years, she had studied her practice by listening to counselling tapes and reading verbatim records of her interviews with clients. She became more “sensitive in listening and monitoring the conversational process”. It takes more than intuition to know a client. “Two people can talk to each other, yet they may not be in the same conversation.” She became “slower in pacing interviews”. She became “more sensitive to the client’s individuality” and committed to “the values intrinsic to human beings”. Besides self-study, she joined a group of social workers to study practice. Members role-played a practice situation and explored how to handle it. They videotaped the role-play for later study. They also discussed professional literature and conducted practitioner research. This mode of self-directed learning required a climate of trust so that members could give and respond to critical comments in order to “come up with good insights”.

Sally considered herself a better social worker now because “the groundwork is stronger”. “I know my clients better (and) can foretell how a client would respond.” She approached practice in the following manner these days:

I no longer bind myself to a fixed frame...whether I can apply those theories. Even if the client did not show much change, I wouldn't feel bad about it. I have the faith that the client will change some other days. What is important is to go through the bad time with her... Some clients may be quite beyond me. They are difficult to deal with. There will be stressful moments... When a client asked me what to talk about, I left it to the client to tell whatever she had in mind. She could express her view and I expressed mine. Then we chose what to do and

tried it out. It is intuition because I don't follow any frame that prescribes my action... Well, it is more than intuition. I have strong affective experience. Sometimes my mind is heavy when seeing the downside of life.

In her view, her present approach to practice was a continuation of the developmental trajectory two years back, although "such stage boundary is no longer meaningful". Now she was able "to integrate the stuff in the first stage (Rogerian counselling) with the stuff in subsequent stages (a framework of practice based on Solution-focused Therapy), thence arriving at something new". For beginning social workers, "commitment to do good won't be good enough" to drive a continuing process of professional development. "The heart to learn is more important." Looking back, she blamed her initial social work education for her disillusion in her beginning years. "I would be on solid ground if I had the sensitivity and respect for my clients. I could read to make up whatever I would need to know. I wouldn't be so concerned about my own ability at the expense of others. It was a false vanity anyway. Most clients do not look for solutions. If we imposed our problem solving orientation, we magnify the problems they could not solve and disempower them."

My reflection on Sally's second story

Sally had gone through a re-visioning of social work practice since our last interview. In the first story, she strove for mastery and finally attained the popular image of an expert practitioner. She could tell intuitively what/how to do, predict with reasonable accuracy client responses and what she could accomplish. She was not an end-user of theories. She transformed theories to create her own practice knowledge. After two years, she had re-written the first story by changing her conception of social work and her orientation to practice in a fundamental way. She repudiated what she had once held dearly and accomplished after long years of dedicated effort to become competent. Save for a continued commitment to be a good social worker, the extent of change amounted to a complete reversal of her past identity as a social worker. In one sense, she had discovered a new social work. In another sense, she had re-discovered the social work that she had once come across and yet failed to recognize. This is a romantic story of a social worker's search for the

essence of social work and, in the process, regenerating it as a living practice.

A (re)discovery of a new(old) conception of social work

The first story did not end with a closure of professional development. Its end is the beginning of the second story. Sally had not reached the zenith of professionalism. Rather, it was the starting point of another search for good social work. However, the search was not about finding another 'Holy Grail' out there. It was a search in the inner space of her practice. She began the second story by telling her most important finding—the key to social work helping is “listening to the client”. It is through listening that a social worker begins to understand a client, and understanding is the necessary groundwork for helping. This is the 'client-centred' perspective that she thought she was practising as a beginner. At that time, she was an involuntary listener. The client led her along, and she perceived this as a sign of her inadequacy. She wanted to go beyond it. The rest was a story already told.

She has re-discovered good social work in what she had no choice but to do in beginning practice. In fact, this is also a discovery. As a beginner, she was listening to the client yet was unable to listen. She lost control of a conversation that led to nowhere. It has taken her many years to learn that listening is difficult but essential if she wants to help another person. How do we account for a 'paradigm shift' of this kind? Sally gave one explanation—being richer in life experience. What she has learned from life is not something social work students will be able to learn in social work education. Indeed, one of the first lessons that students learn is to draw a line between the professional and the personal. In her second story, the line is no longer distinct. The personal enters into practice in what she intuitively knew would be good for the client. Living her life has enriched her worldview with a deep philosophical core. Now, she respects the diversity of human experience and individual uniqueness. She accepts human fallibility. The right thing to do is not always what people will do. Indeed, what is right is not something for her to judge. She can empathize with clients going through difficult times in their life because she has lived hers. In this new vision of social work, helping is premised on a common humanity that binds a client and a social worker together. In a conversational medium, they (re)construct meaning out of the client's experience, hence the importance on the part of the

worker to listen for understanding. However, the diversity of human experience means that listening for understanding is always difficult.

Sally has formulated a new conception of social work that restores its moral-ethical character as a practical activity. It was the conception of social work in the profession's formative years. However, the profession's three-decade long effort to turn social work into a social technology has pushed this conception to the margin. In Sally's new/old version of social work, professional artistry is as important, if not more, as technical competence. There are steps and procedures in following a framework to practise, but there are no steps to follow in listening for understanding and knowing what is good and appropriate to do for the client. In this regard, a good, ethical person with the 'heart' to help and the capacity to feel a deep concern for another person will be a better social worker. Sally displayed this quality in the two practice stories when she did not follow the standard way because she knew intuitively not to was right. However, she does not throw away technical competence. Social work is both artistry and science. She will bring in theories and therapies models to open up new perspectives and potential for change. Theories serve practice, but do not guide it. Practice determines the use of theories—"what will fit the client". This is an important difference from the conventional interpretation of the role of theories taught in social work education.

Self-directed learning to sustain continuous professional development

There will be no ending to professional development now that Sally has arrived at this stage. Previously, Sally could discern a linear sequence of stages that she moved through in her social work career. However, when living a social work career means continuously learning the social work embodied in her practice, she enters into a stage of continuous professional development when "stage boundaries are no longer meaningful". She learned by studying her practice (listening to her taped interview sessions) on her own and with other practitioners in 'practitioner inquiry groups' (McLeod, 1999). There is no 'trainer-trainee hierarchy' in this mode of professional development. Knowledge is derived from practice, not handed down by an external authority. As long as a person has the 'heart' to learn, there is always the possibility of constructing new knowledge in practice. Through their engagement in

a continuous, self-directed, life-long learning project, social workers can sustain a process of professional development and re-generate social work as a living practice.

Chapter 6

Flora, a Beginner's Story of Learning a 'New' Social Work

Flora's story is of how a beginner learned to survive a social work job and become an experienced practitioner. In the first year, she grappled with a "local version" of social work practice vastly different from the one she learned in social work education. I have tracked Flora's social work career for five years (and am still following her social work career) and interviewed her five times before writing her story.

The first interview	26/9/94	The second month in practice
The second interview	28/3/95	The eighth month
The third interview	28/7/95	End of the first year
The fourth interview	22/8/97	End of the third year
The fifth interview	18/3/99	Into the fifth year

It is by design that I positioned her story immediately after Sally's story. Sally recalled her beginning experience after more than ten years. Given that autobiographical memory fades, her storying of the past is understandably crude and sketchy. Her first story reveals the elements of a beginner's experience: feeling incompetent, not knowing what to do, doing the same thing all the time, wanting to quit, consulting peers, trying to learn by reading and taking courses...

In her first three stories, Flora narrated her first-year experience in a job she was learning from scratch. They provided a richly textured account of a beginner's experience. Would her experience be the same as Sally's? Would she still be a beginner one year into the job? What shaped what and how she learned? In addition,

her first-year experience might give some clues as to how well our social work programme prepared students for a social work career. The last two stories, taken at the end of the third and the fifth year of her social work career, might support or undermine the stage-progression model described in Sally's first story.

Flora had worked for two months as a counsellor in a drug rehabilitation agency when we had our first interview. She picked this job because she would be doing casework in a specialized setting. She thought working in settings like children and youth centres would be a "simple job" that even a novice could handle. "I wouldn't have to think and there wouldn't be any development." This job would give her "more stimulation". She was prepared to read and consult other people. "I would be able to acquire rich experience within one or two years." In the interview, I asked her what her experience was like and how adequately social work education had equipped her for beginning practice.

A Novice in a Strange World of Practice

First story, 26th September 1994

Flora found herself in a strange world of practice. "The social work values taught...are different from the values held by workers here." Social workers (many had worked there for only about a year) advised her that the clients were "very cunning" and would "manipulate and lie". In their view, these clients were not amenable to help, and even "deserved to be reprimanded". At first, Flora was bewildered because their negative views about clients did not harmonize with the social work values known to her. However, after meeting some clients, she also found them "professional and experienced"; they would "manipulate social workers". Once, a client took advantage of her inexperience and asked her to arrange for him early admission to the treatment centre. Another client asked a new worker to apply for him some practical services although "he didn't meet the eligibility criteria". Another new worker nearly made the grave mistake of helping a client to bring something (probably illegal) out of the

treatment centre. Thus, new workers had good reason not to trust their clients. They needed to be on guard or else their clients would spread the news around that “such and such a worker is easy going”. In a home visit to an old-timer, the client could tell Flora was inexperienced. “You speak in a very different manner... There are things that you shouldn’t ask...and things that workers wouldn’t do.” Sensing her own vulnerability to clients’ manipulation, Flora adopted a ‘not-trusting’ attitude.

Grappling with value dilemmas

She had come across many dilemmas. In one story, a client asked her to write a supporting letter to shorten his waiting time for compassionate re-housing. However, she considered “the degree of disability not serious enough” to warrant him “to jump line”. It would also mean “cheating the government”. On the other hand, if she declined, she worried that the client might regard her “useless”. In addition, there was another consideration in the client’s favour. “It is a real need and the waiting time is unreasonably long.” In the end, she accepted her inability to help, blaming the stringent regulations of a “defective system” for this. In another story, the client had real financial needs. Again, she was unable to help “because of the regulations”. Other new workers faced similar ethical dilemmas. They also ended up abiding by the rules and regulations of ‘a faulty system’.

Learning the ‘local knowledge’ for practice

Another difficulty she experienced was to get clients to keep appointments. Once, Flora phoned a ‘no-show’ client. She heard the client’s voice in the background telling his wife to lie. She was both hurt and angry for being “rejected and cheated” by the client even though her intention was to help. Experienced workers later counselled her that both ‘no-show’ and ‘non-contact’ were signs of relapse. “There is little that a worker can help (because) the situation isn’t bad enough (for the client)... can’t help them from depending on drugs until the day they die.” Her experience with clients verified this view. She theorized why clients could not quit drug taking. “They weren’t

in a desperate situation...not the 'dead-end' yet... They didn't find any motivation or pressure to change..." One of her clients was a hard-core drug addict. He had gone through the treatment programme many times. He was still hooked even though he had one leg amputated because of drug taking. She was pessimistic. "I think the 'devil at heart' traps them in recurring relapses. If they couldn't tell the reason, how could we help them to deal with the underlying problem?" Workers in the office believed that these clients would not quit drug use voluntarily unless their situation was "dead serious". They could do very little since change was only possible by clients' own efforts. Centre supervisors also downplayed the importance of outcome because it had little to do with professional competence, making it easier for social workers to accept the lack of 'achievement' in their job. Nonetheless, workers would still be vulnerable to burnout. "Work is busy (and) tiring...the same procedure is repeated as clients relapsed as fast as they were admitted."

The making of a shared practice

Clients fell into two categories. The "hard-core cases" used to enter the treatment centre once or twice a year to 'cleanse the engine oil' (to 'repair' the body again for another round of drug abuse). It would be a waste of effort to invest in this group of clients. The second group was "those clients who will likely succeed". Like other new workers, Flora inherited this prognosis. She also targeted those clients still abstaining as a way "to cope with the caseload"

There were many opportunities to learn from experienced workers during the ferry-ride to the treatment centre which was located in a remote, out-lying island. Whenever she came across a practice issue, she would ask them "the way they would handle" it. Other new workers also sought their advice. Even workers with no more than one-year's experience already differed from new workers in "their way of working and perspective". They considered new workers too lenient, often taking over their clients' responsibilities. Flora relied mostly on professional peers for their advice on practical matters since she did not find the supervisor's advice helpful. For

problems in practice, she would reflect on them first to pinpoint the nature of the issue before asking for advice from experienced colleagues.

The value of initial social work education

After working for two months, Flora could handle the job reasonably well. Experienced workers advised her “theory would not help much (because) you could learn it from work experience”. Her own experience also supported this view. “At first, I didn’t know how to respond to my clients, but with more experience, I know how to respond...and what sort of reaction from them.” Accepting the need to “learn on the job”, she still considered initial social work education of value to her. “I still make mistakes...but I would have some sort of awareness beforehand.” Formal training had given her “the basic knowledge...some crude ideas about some theories that I may apply...” If she were untrained, she would not be able to “articulate the terms” in communicating with fellow social workers.

My reflection on Flora’s first story

Flora’s account of her beginning practice suggests that beginners lose their bearing in a setting where the local version of social work is different from that which they learned in initial social work education. Learning the job necessarily entails taking up membership in the discourse community at the workplace. Social workers draw on and contribute to a local discourse to make sense of their practice. In Flora’s case, the local discourse gave her ideas about how to deal with drug addicts, what ‘no-show’ and ‘non-contact’ means, why clients relapse, why there is little that social workers can do to prevent client relapse, and how to prioritise one’s effort. The local discourse functions as a system of meaning to make social workers’ activities intelligible, thus maintaining a tradition of practice in the workplace.

The first thing that beginners need to learn is this local discourse if they cannot rely on theories to navigate their activities. They learn by consulting experienced colleagues and taking part in workplace conversations. This is the 'oral tradition' in social work offices that helps to break the individual nature of their activities and gives them a communal sense of meaningful practice (Pithouse, 1987). This 'oral tradition' perpetuates the local discourse and contributes to the reproduction of a collective practice. The beginners' experience in turn validates the discourse. Thus, when a client requested Flora to do something, she concluded that the client (and other clients as well) was manipulative.

In beginning practice, Flora came across situations in which she faced dilemmas arising from conflicting values and competing ethical obligations. There were also dilemmas arising from her egoistic concerns. In neither case did she refer to the professional discourse taught in social work education. Rather, she framed these dilemmas in terms of her personal values and concerns (such as "the client would regard me useless", "unfair to help the client jump line"). A dilemma defies solution. Its resolution entails a choice of lesser evils. To her (probably other beginners also), the lesser evil was to conform to the rules and regulations of a 'faulty system', although it might not do justice to the client.

Flora's first story suggests that the value of initial social work education was minimal in her practice setting. Social work in the 'real world' differs greatly from the 'official version' of social work. Social work values do not hold in real-life practice. Professional knowledge is irrelevant to practice. Beginners learn a new version of social work by following a tradition of practice. Seen in this light, workplace socialization is more powerful than initial social work education in shaping beginners' values and practice. It will be difficult for beginners to break away from the tradition of practice and the local discourse that supports it, until and unless they are able to confer new meaning to recurrent experiences in their day-to-day work.

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We had our second interview six months later. Flora was still working in the outpatient team. After another six months, would there be a deepening of her reliance on workplace values and knowledge?

Becoming More Thoughtful

Second story, 28th March 1995

Flora questioned the value of counselling when what clients needed was tangible service. One of her clients showed a good potential to resume normal life. He was a truck driver. In a traffic accident, he was liable for the damage to another person's car. He would have to sell his truck to settle it, but this would mean losing his livelihood. Flora could not find the financial assistance he would need. "I could feel his distress even as he accepted this on surface." The client relapsed soon afterwards. Flora anticipated this. "He's very troubled. I talked to my colleagues...they would find it strange if he didn't relapse under such circumstances..." She offered a generalized account to explain why clients would relapse easily. "They can't find other ways to deal with problems... What immediately comes to mind is to take drugs." Clients rarely sought help from social workers even if they had reached breaking point. "I am always one step behind." Nonetheless, she was still hopeful. "Something could be done, like linking with their parents or involving them in regular counselling sessions."

Giving clients the benefit of doubt

She was not entirely certain that what she did for clients was good for them. For instance, clients would ask her to write a reference letter to spare them mandatory drug treatment. However, some exploited her and disappeared once they got a lenient sentence from the court. "Drug addicts...are street-smart or they pretend to be so..." She found it difficult to tell whether a client was genuine. "In one moment, they expressed deep remorse, weeping and confessing their wrong doing. In the next moment, they were in high spirits, laughing and fooling around." However, she could

not afford to distrust a client even if he might manipulate her. "If the client doesn't keep his promise, my loss is the letter prepared for him, and maybe my sympathy for this person. However, it is still better than withholding my help on the assumption that he may be manipulative. What if he really wants to change?" She could not rely on her assessment because "these clients were so good at self-presentation". She preferred to give her clients the benefit of doubt. Seeing her clients in a stereotyped way would be irresponsible. "It's like I also look down upon them." She would rather meet their request even if she were not sure about their intent.

Feeling the burden of ethical responsibility

Clients needed only to register, pay a fee, and hand in a photo for admission to the treatment centre. She thought this procedure problematic because "some people actually used it as a safe place for drug-taking". There were rumours about an illegal drug supply inside the treatment centre. For this reason, she was wary about admitting first-timers because it might do them more harm than good. "What can I say to their parents when they leave our centre worse off?" She felt the burden of responsibility in making this important decision. She would forewarn the client to "keep away from hard-core addicts" and minimise the risk by placing him in a 'model house' where the residents were mostly young. "I tell them...it depends a lot on them." In her view, this is still a better choice despite the risk of bad influence. "If they don't try, it's sure that they won't make it out there." Acknowledging that "the outcome is determined by many external factors", she still sounded optimistic. "Some did succeed in changing for good after their stay there."

Professional learning inside practice

She came to view "client rejection" in a different light. "I shouldn't expect them to trust me just after a few initial contacts... Even if clients reject me now, it doesn't imply that they will do so forever." She rationalized "client rejection" as a normative but transient phenomenon, being part of the trust-building process. The emotional

meaning of client rejection had changed. "Now, I don't feel angry if a client refused to answer my call." She became more sympathetic to the client's position. "It can be intrusive. Maybe it is inconvenient for him to talk to me over the phone at that point." She also sounded hopeful. "If I keep on trying to contact him...he may become more receptive after rejecting me a number of times..."

She picked up an important piece of wisdom from practice. "The client was very hostile. I thought probably he perceived me to be the same as other social workers whom he had met in the past..." She looked for a way to handle the hostile client and recalled her experience of working with a 'resistant client' in a fieldwork placement. "It's like I had to drag him along..." The fieldwork supervisor advised her "to allow time for the relationship to grow". There was transfer of past learning. "I thought it wouldn't help to press along. It would only arouse more resistance. I should allow time for the client to cool down a bit ... Some clients may go along with our request, but others may feel offended and become even more adamant..." She was able to appreciate the client's experience. "In response, I conveyed to the client that I wanted to listen in a soft manner... Gradually, he softened up a bit. This is effective."

She learned from this practice episode that hostile clients might become more responsive if she "persisted in a patient way". "Some degree of genuine concern for the client is effective... If the client is already hostile and yet we criticize him for poor attitudes, things will become even worse." She had improvised a new way to cope with a difficult situation. Beginners were more positive in their attitude toward their clients than the more experienced colleagues. The latter would approach similar situations in a routinized way because "they have been in contact with clients for too long (and) have acquired many preconceived views". In their turn, clients also held some preconceived views about social workers. Hence, "there is very little to talk about between the two".

In the past, she thought it was easy for drug addicts to return to normal life once they ended their drug dependence. After meeting more clients, she realized that their lives would become even more difficult when they tried to resume normal life. "Previously, they only concerned about money. It is just one problem, a simple one."

Once back to normal life, they need to attend to more things. They may be able to find a low-salary job, but there is not enough money to go around. For those unemployed, they have more free time. Family members begin to bother them... Life becomes miserable.”

Feeling more comfortable in practice

In the past, she was insecure with clients. She was not sure how to respond to them, what questions to ask and how to ask them. She was so anxious that she forgot her question. After getting to know them, her insecure feeling gradually disappeared. “They weren’t as bad as I thought. Some even behaved well... Gradually, I felt more comfortable, knowing they could control themselves and wouldn’t harm me... I am able to anticipate how they will respond to my questions.” She had gained practice competence. “I am able to use a bit of skills... I am able to ask clients in a more comprehensive manner... I am able to apply a little of what I have learned... I know some methods...” Reflecting on the response she got from a client, she would frame her questions better next time. She would also reflect on her experience in difficult practice situations, such as “testing behaviours or getting stuck and not knowing how to respond”.

As she became more secure, she would seek peer consultation only when in a crisis or when something special happened. She was not looking for what/how to do since it had already happened. Rather, she looked for “validation of my practice” by those colleagues who were “quite competent”. She also wanted to learn from them how they could remain “so positive toward their work” after working for many years.

Flora would like to transfer to the “in-patient treatment team” in the near future. The job would be tough and demanding because she would have to follow clients through the entire rehabilitation process and deal with wardens in the treatment centre. However, there would be more things to learn and a greater sense of achievement.

My reflection on Flora's second story

Eight months into the job, Flora would have learnt what a beginner needed to learn on the job. I did find an 'insider's voice' in the second story. She began to construct personal meanings from her practice experience, drawing on the discourse resource acquired from initial social work education. She seemed to have reversed her affiliation from the local discourse back to the professional discourse taught in social work education. The second story had no trace of those egoistic, survival concerns which featured so prominently in the first story. The focus was on how to practise and her experience as a practitioner. I think familiarization with the job was instrumental in bringing about the shift in focus.

The fact that she became comfortable with clients suggests that she no longer put on them the negative stereotypes associated with drug addicts—dishonest, manipulative, hostile, dangerous, and worthless. She could relate to them as individuals who needed help from her. Increasingly, she would discover that they are ordinary people as much as they are drug addicts. At the same time, familiarization meant some routines being established or learnt. Hence, she found the experience of client contacts more predictable. Perhaps if beginners are to move beyond reproducing the tradition of practice, they need to learn the tradition, follow it, and succeed in handling the job reasonably well. When they begin to feel less anxious and more competent, they will have the mental space to attend to their practice experience, reflect on it, and derive professional learning from it.

Flora could now feel with clients and understand their situations. The 'truck-driver story' conveyed an air of resignation and anguish. She had failed this client in his struggle to ward off relapse. In this story, she displayed a sympathetic understanding of the life circumstances of drug addicts. Relapse became comprehensible in the light of the constraints in their life circumstances. As she pointed out, it was more difficult for them to lead a normal life than a life wasted by drugs. Probably, some of her clients had allowed her into their life worlds. She must

have seemed caring to them despite the fact that the relationship may have begun with distrust.

She had done some re-thinking on the issue of trust. Clients might lie to take advantage of her. Nonetheless, she was prepared to trust them. She had found an ethical position. It would be ethically wrong to stereotype clients (they would lie) and withhold service. She had re-discovered the social work values taught in her initial social work education. She could explore the meaning of social work values only in practice where they assumed significance. In the first story, she was judgemental. She agreed with experienced colleagues that drug addicts were not trustworthy. In the second story, she began to appreciate the ethical nature of social work and the ethical responsibility of practitioners for their decisions and action (e.g. admitting young first-timers to the inpatient treatment programme). This is a sign of professional growth. Another sign was a growing capacity to decentre—seeing things from the client’s perspective. Reframing the meaning of ‘client rejection’ is a good example. I think her sense of security with clients (“drug addicts are not dangerous people”) provided the pre-condition for decentring. She recognized it as a practice issue after she had familiarized herself with the job.

The account of ‘softening up’ a hostile client signified another area of professional growth—the capacity to improvise new strategies to handle difficult situations. It is a good illustration of Donald Schön’s account of how practitioners produce practice knowledge through ‘reflection-in-action’ as they try to cope with novel or difficult situations. It also illustrates how a practitioner can refer to her/his accumulated experience and transfer past learning. It contributes to understanding the ‘epistemology of practice’, showing how a practitioner produced practice knowledge as she improvised new strategies to handle a recurrent difficult situation and transformed experiential learning into propositional knowledge: “Some degree of genuine concern for the client is effective... If the client is already hostile and yet we fault him for poor attitudes, things will become even worse...” There is also meta-learning in this example. First, it is possible to improvise new ways if past strategies

failed. Second, experienced practitioners may be 'trapped' in the received way because their clients will reinforce them.

Flora began to free herself from the tradition of practice after working for another six months. The grip of the local discourse on her practice loosened. As she became capable of reflecting on her practice, she was able to see things anew. Thus, workplace socialization was less constraining. I think social work education provided another discourse with which to make sense of her practice experience.

* * * * *

We had our third interview four months later. Flora had joined the in-patient team a few months ago. Clients went through a three-month in-patient treatment programme, followed by a three-month stay in a hostel and then a two-year after-care period. Workers would help them to return to their family or apply for compassionate re-housing, and other family support services. Once these clients lived on their own, it would be difficult to "get hold of them". However, they were also most vulnerable to relapse. She found the job demanding.

Constructing a Professional Landscape

Third story, 28th July 1995

Before joining the "in-patient team", she questioned the practice of "chasing after clients" because it meant "other-control" instead of "self-control". However, she too had chased clients since joining the team. "We must see them every week... Something may happen...". She would ask questions to find out how they were getting on. Workers monitored their clients closely or else "something wrong might have happened" and unknown to them. "It will give me the feeling that I don't care very much about my clients." New workers like her worked overtime to talk to every client during hostel visits. "We want to know how things go with each and every client..."

Getting hold of her clients became a preoccupation. If a client stopped seeing his social worker, “this is often an indication of relapse”. However, she could do little even if they did not turn up. In the past, she was not so concerned if a client did not turn up because he might have relapsed anyway, but this group of clients had a better chance of success. “There is the hope in helping them to stay drug-free...”

Social workers did not see themselves “performing poorly” when clients relapsed because they had little control over outcome. “Maybe human being is by nature unpredictable, or maybe it’s the problem with this particular client group.” She identified “a pattern specific to drug addicts”—looking for the ‘kick’ and inability to defer gratification. The “gate-keeper role” made relationship building difficult because these clients were “practical people” who would manipulate workers to get what they wanted. It was “difficult to use counselling skills in working with these clients”. It was also “useless to dwell on feelings”. “It is like unloading their misgivings. But then what?” She had discussed with classmates working in other fields the lack of control over outcome in working with drug addicts. They counselled her that “human service is by nature difficult...not because of the type of clientele”. She attributed this to the complexity in human living and hence “many constraints” on what social workers could achieve.

From individual work to family work

She came across a client chastised by his wife for being a poor provider. Flora tried to work with the wife, but the latter rejected her. “She considered it perfectly justified to push her husband to work harder and earn more money.” In the end, the client reacted to family stress by taking drugs. Such experiences led her to conclude: “Family experience may contribute to a person’s drug problem... They have had difficult family relationships for a long time.” There was a consensus among the workers that family work was important. “Clients have a clear conception of what it takes to get rid of their drug-taking habit, but they don’t have the support from their families. The focus is more on working with the family than with the client individually.” Workers would meet family members frequently to explain the treatment

programme and solicit their cooperation. However, she found it difficult to do family work. "Families don't understand the treatment process or the purpose of having an interim stay in a hostel." It took a lot of explanation before family members would finally understand. "It is most difficult to convince the wives because they prefer their husbands to live with them."

The problem with individualisation in practice

After working for a year, she began to appreciate the meaning of individualization and the difficulty of putting this principle into practice. "The longer you work, the more clients you meet. I begin to notice that different people present different problems. What do we do with these problems? ... Because clients vary very much...there are no fixed criteria that will apply to all clients..." Once she came across two clients of roughly the same age, one 16-year-old and the other 19-year-old. She found it "quite easy to convince the 16 year-old client for he had only limited social experience", whereas the 19-year-old client was much less receptive and "always on guard". She also questioned whether a theory could "fit every problem and every person". Initially, she thought workers could overcome this difficulty if they had a number of therapies in reserve and were able to "apply any one of them any time". On second thoughts, she reckoned that it would take a long time for a person to become skilled in using even one therapy. Moreover, it would be "very confusing" to practise several therapies. Even if she had a direction, a procedural map, it would not be applicable to all clients "because different clients would hold different views toward the treatment process". To be responsive, she "must add something to it", but she found it difficult to "know what to do". She thought it might be due to her inexperience.

Striving to be professional

She wanted to re-visit the professional knowledge taught in her student days and see how to apply it in her work because "it makes no sense to ask the same question

every time". The workplace culture did not support workers in using theories in their practice. Beginners were concerned about the use of theories, but they did not "have the time to think about this". Thus far, she had never attempted to use any theory but she wanted to make the 'theory-practice' connection. "Is what I do (in practice) what I learned back in school?" Drawing on her working experience, she could advise new workers. "I know a little bit more... I can tell workers from other fields what we do..." However, she was not confident that such experientially derived knowledge would work. "You can tell other people what your work is like, but you're not sure what the outcome will be." Professional knowledge would be "more convincing", but "I won't be able to say...what theories I used and how...to handle these difficulties..." She attributed the difficulty to a deficiency in field-based training. "We were taught a body of theories, but were allowed little time to use it in our fieldwork placements." Thus, she questioned the relevance of professional training to her work. She thought other people could do the work done by social workers.

She did not think she had grown professionally while working for a year. She had attended some courses, but the participants were mostly from other practice settings. Whilst the course content might be relevant to them, it was hardly relevant to her. Her employing agency did not provide in-service training specific to working with drug addicts. She regretted having "no exposure to new development". However, even if there were such opportunities, the job demands would leave little time or energy to study. The workday often stretched from seven in the morning to around mid night. "It's so tiring that you won't think about study."

There was to be a major re-deployment in October. She could apply for transfer back to the outpatient team. However, she had made up her mind to stay longer. "I have reached a point when I begin to try something out... I am beginning to adapt to the work life and the work environment, but I am not yet able to improve my skills..." She wanted to stay longer "to see the result of what I have done". Even though it was "hard work", she found some job satisfaction. "A client came to see you voluntarily and told you how he's getting on ... It is this meagre sense of achievement that sustains us."

My reflection on Flora's third story

After joining the 'in-patient treatment team', Flora had to learn a practice different from that of the 'out-patient team', and picked up a new discourse. Thus, she had a new way of comprehending the reason for workers in this team to "chase after clients". This illustrates again the dominance of the local discourse in influencing the way beginners look at their experience. Another example is the explanation of social workers' inability to influence client outcomes.

There was continuous growth in her understanding of drug addicts. In the last story, she was sympathetic with their life circumstances that kept them from getting back to normal life. Now, she reached the conclusion that she must include the family in the treatment process. I think this is a major paradigm shift in how she looked at helping clients—the family is the locus of problem and solution. Thus, the focus changed from individual work to family work. Looking beyond the individual to locate the locus of the problem of drug addiction first emerged in the previous story. Flora was learning from her practice experience. Her concern about individualizing practice is another sign of her growing capacity to inspect and reflect on practice. This concern is connected to an important issue in practice: How generalized knowledge can be used in a particular context? Reasoning that no generalized knowledge could be applied to all clients, she faced this question: How do we practise if every client is unique? This is an important epistemological issue.

At the time she chose this job, she was looking to gain professional knowledge in a specialized field of practice. She embraced the conception of professionalism that is grounded on the authority of professional knowledge. If she could tell what theories she used, she would be more convinced that what she did was right and she would have greater control over the outcome. If she could not articulate the theoretical base of what she did, it was not professional practice. She could afford to explore this issue now

after learning the job for a year. She was not looking for improvement in practice or in her effectiveness. Improving the professional status of her work was valuable by itself.

Sally felt stagnant in the beginning year because she could not find a better way to practise. Flora had this feeling too at the end of the first year because she could find little from outside to make her work professional. It seems that beginning practice is a hazardous period. Beginners need to pass the 'survival test' and, having passed it, may find little progress from that point on. It will be especially distressing to beginners, who enter social work with an inflated sense of professionalism, to find that social work in the real world is not like that portrayed in initial social work education.

Flora continued to question the value of social work in helping drug addicts. There is an undertone of disillusionment in this story, rightly so if she was not sure about the worth of what she did and could not see any way to make her practice more professional. On the other hand, there is also an optimistic note in this story. She was learning and could find ways to deal with difficult situations. In addition, she began to raise issues of fundamental importance to practice—the problem of individualization and the use of theories in practice.

* * * * *

I stopped tracking Flora's work experience for two years before re-establishing contact with her. She had tried unsuccessfully to find a new job. After a year in the 'in-patient team', she returned to the 'out-patient team'. Looking back, she valued the professional learning she had acquired. "I understand people's experience when they try to quit drug and what they will face living in the community afterwards. I have a better view of case development...a more comprehensive view of our service."

A Time of Discontent

Fourth story, 22nd August 1997

The way the 'outpatient team' worked had changed. In the past, all the 200 outpatients were nominally her clients. She selected "the more responsive ones" and left the others to "the routine of taking registration and filling forms". This time around, she was really "doing something" and had "more time for it" because she could have "a clear direction...a plan to contact them (and) interview their parents". There were several other new features. Former clients counselled new clients in the waiting room. "The most helpful thing they do is to collect urine samples. Now we know whether a client is taking drug or not. If he is, we talk about his drug-taking habit. If he isn't, we would talk about other things." Selected clients could join a 'detoxification' programme. There was a new eighteen-month after-care service. There were groups too, including a parents' group. "I am now convinced we can really do something in the new programme, but the process will be a prolonged one...lasting for one to two years."

Grievances and discontent

Workers collected statistics to compare their work. People were concerned about outcome. "It was not something spoken, but the figures are listed for people to see." In her view, the detoxification figures were unreliable. She did not see them as an indication of a worker's performance. "There are many things beyond our control...there are many factors...I don't know if it has anything to do with the worker or some other factor...since they are exposed to societal influences out there." She had revised her view about the merit of monitoring their clients closely. "We can't watch the client all the time (and) it is hard to say how close 'close monitoring' should be. A client may 'sink' or 'swim' in spite of our effort... It depends a lot on the client." However, there was an expectation that workers would join their clients in social activities to show their support. They had to attend to "many trivial things...but

couldn't handle all these things". They also faced many constraints in working with other people, such as wardens in the treatment centre. Some clients complained that they were not doing the kind of things that workers would do in the old days. Supervisors also expected them to meet their clients' wishes. "Probably, they (supervisors) think this is the way to closely monitor clients and give them the feeling of being valued." However, she considered this out-dated practice. The new generation of workers rejected this. "Some of us even likened ourselves to 'escort girls' accompanying clients to do this and that." She thought it was acceptable to give clients a treat for good performance, but not when they regarded it as an entitlement. She found it annoying when clients made oblique comments that she was not a good social worker because she did not treat them the way previous workers had. There was little support from the senior administration. "Supervisors would not stand on your side when a client made a fuss for nothing."

More realistic about practice

In the past, she believed that "social workers were capable people who could solve any problems". In her student days, she had read casebooks in which "every case presented...is a successful one". Now, she reckoned that it was not easy for social workers to help clients to change. "For every successful case, there are many unsuccessful ones." She became "more realistic...pessimistic, and maybe fatalistic", acknowledging that "some clients won't be able to pull themselves out". She had acquired a new understanding of their life circumstances. "It takes more than a single factor to account for why and how these people end up in such a state." She still faced difficulties in practice and was aware of the need to learn in order to meet new demands. "There is a prevalent feeling that we don't know what to do when facing our clients... The whole agency is looking for some other things...to help workers, things like family therapy." She had tried to bring in family therapy but was not competent to practise it. "I touched a bit on this, a bit on that, and finally gave up."

Practitioner inquiry is the way out

She found in-service training of little help. Many courses had little to do with drug addiction. "We couldn't put into our practice." Those courses designed specifically for practice in this field were no better. "It's like recycling what we had been talking back in the workplace." She did not find many new things even in courses conducted by "great masters". Lately, the agency organized an in-house training course (on family therapy with a focus on working with drug addicts), but was not resourceful enough to follow it up with "a series of training courses". In her view, the only way for frontline workers to learn was to share their problems in practice. "We do it in a more formal way now." A few young supervisors took a more active approach. They organized regular case conferences for workers to discuss their cases. Sometimes, they prescribed readings to add some intellectual input to the discussion. "It is helpful to read these articles in a somewhat serious manner. Otherwise, we would just talk in common-sense terms..." It was in such a context that they picked up the concept of "harm reduction". She embraced the new ideology that reducing the potential harm of drug addiction was a worthwhile goal. Some clients could retain their life roles for a long time by relying on the methadone programme. The notion of "harm reduction" gave her a respite from disillusionment. "The aim is not necessarily to quit drug taking. Working on other things is not meaningless after all." She had tried to connect this concept to her practice, and presented her work in a public seminar. "If I didn't have this opportunity, my understanding of 'harm reduction' would still be half-baked."

Trapped in a stagnant practice

She identified herself as belonging to the new generation of workers, but not "as new as those new workers in the other team". In the "out-patient team", senior workers had worked for more than twenty years. She did not want to become an old-timer because "it will be difficult to change to other fields". She would like to try other fields of practice because "there is nothing new coming out from the drug rehabilitation field". She began to feel stagnant. "It's like doing the same thing all these years." She

would have left the agency at the end of her tour of service in the “in-patient team”, but decided to work in the “out-patient team” again for another year because it would be a new programme.

My reflection on Flora’s fourth story

After working in the agency for three years, Flora had become an ‘experienced’ worker since most of her contemporaries had left after a year. The re-tooled ‘out-patient team’ was different from what it used to be three years ago. She did not experience much difficulty in coping and learning what would amount to a new job, presumably because she was not a freshman. A continuing theme connects this story with the preceding one—reflecting on practice and a growing sentiment of disillusionment and stagnation. She seemed to be ‘taking stock’ of her social work career. The disillusionment conveyed in the last story escalated to expressed discontent about agency practice and lack of management support. She was explicit about the worthlessness of her work—clients ‘sink’ or ‘swim’ in spite of what she did. There was a palpable sense of resignation because she (and her colleagues) had lost direction after practising for three years. She felt stagnant “doing the same thing all these years”. She tried to ground her practice on family therapy, but stopped after failing at the initial attempt. It may sound depressing, but I think Flora will still try to find a way out. The potential for innovative practice was still there.

Flora’s developmental trajectory over a five-year social work career

Flora’s stories provided real-time tracking of a beginner’s experience. Her stories revealed what it was like for a beginner to survive in the practice world and developmental changes over time. I am going to continue her stories in a separate

chapter (Chapter 15) built on our last interview (the fifth interview). She used that interview to grapple with her difficulty in articulating a generalized framework of practice. It took her five years to perceive the need for articulating a framework to ground her practice. Such a quest to codify her practice in propositional knowledge marks an important signpost in her developmental trajectory. Achieving this feat is the ultimate vindication of her professionalism—knowing what to do and communicating what she knows in a theoretical/conceptual language. Flora was going through the first leg of the developmental process that Sally had gone through—from uncertainty to certainty and control over practice. Like the ‘path’ described in Sally’s first story, there is a stage-progression in terms of the change in the focal concerns in Flora’s professional life over a five-year period.

The **first stage** (the first few months of her beginning year) was a period of ‘survival’. It was marked by her concern about learning a new job, dealing with her clients, and her incompetent performance in the professional role. There was on-the-job learning during this period, but the focus was reproducing a tradition of practice and acquiring the local discourse to make practice intelligible. Flora’s beginning experience was in sharp contrast to Sally’s because of the differences in the job and the local culture of the practice setting. The latter began to grapple with the ‘theory-practice’ issue at the beginning of her social work career. Flora’s concern was handling clients. Sally’s concern was using theories in practice.

The **second stage** covered the second half of the beginning year. She had learned and adopted a collective practice by this time. She had the mental space to look into her practice experience, reflect on it, and construct personal meanings. Professional learning became prominent once she was sufficiently familiar with the job and comfortable in working with drug addicts. Sally also went through a period of intensive professional learning after ‘surviving’ the job. However, they differed in what and how they learned. Flora learned what life was like for drug addicts and why it was difficult for them to break away from the grip of drugs. She reframed the meaning of ‘client rejection’ and improvised a way to engage ‘hostile clients’. Sally learned a new framework of practice, which she later transformed into a personal model.

In the **third stage**, Flora began to own her practice and explored issues of personal significance. At the same time, she began to break away from the shared practice, which she previously adopted to give her the security of knowing what to do in conformity with the workplace norms. She wanted to make her practice professional by grounding it on theories. At the same time, there was an emergent sign of discontent, as she was increasingly disappointed by the absence of workplace support for her effort to ground her practice on theories.

Both Flora and Sally faced the threat of stagnation at points in their professional life. Flora began to sense stagnation toward the end of the third year when she began to lose hope of professionalising her practice. She had been re-cycling practice with little professional growth. Sally experienced two crises of waning faith. Both felt stagnant when professional learning and change came to a standstill. In Flora's case, the **fourth stage** was a period of discontent and stagnation. On the one hand, she was unable to inject greater professionalism into her practice; on the other, she felt increasingly alienated by the absence of agency support for professional development. She could not find new ways to help her clients when she had decided that the current way did not work. She wanted to change her career but did not succeed in doing so.

In the **fifth stage**, Flora's concern was not about practice itself but about how to articulate a framework of practice. She must have reached a level of proficiency at which she sounded confident. She was sure of her ability to demonstrate to a beginner how to practise in a concrete situation but she could not articulate a generalized framework of practice. There is a close parallel with Sally in the 'deepening' stage. Both reached a state of proficiency and were confident about how to act in practice. However, they arrived at a proficient level from opposite directions. Flora began from practice to create the knowledge for practice; practice-based learning supported her practice. Sally began with theories and therapy models, and developed her proficiency by working them out in practice. Flora was unable to articulate a framework of practice because she did not start with one. She wanted to turn practical 'know how' into professional knowledge. Sally took a framework of practice as a point of reference and transformed it into a style of practice that was enacted rather than articulated. She did

not perceive the need to articulate this personal framework because there was an extant language to describe her practice in general terms.

Chapter 7

Iris, Riding over the 'Ups-and-Downs' in her Professional Life

Iris was a long-service frontline worker, having worked for more than ten years in the same agency. She had a special place in the history of this study. She was the first participant I met in the first series of interviews. After seven years, I still preserve a vivid memory of our first encounter, meeting at the roadside near the family service centre where she worked. It marked the beginning of fieldwork in this study.

A Difficult Journey toward Competence

First story, 5th May 1994

It was tough in the beginning. I had a mixed workload of school social work and family service. Soon I realized that the supervisor was dissatisfied with my performance. There was one incident. I was working with a high-risk family. The mother was a discharged mental patient. The strained marital relationship had resulted in the child's psychological problem. One day after seeing the client, her son rushed to my office in the evening because the client had swallowed all the pills prescribed by her psychiatrist. Being a freshman, I did not know what to do in a crisis like this. A colleague accompanied me on the ambulance trip to the hospital. She was a very experienced worker. She helped by looking after the boy while I attended to the client. The supervisor brought up this incident later in a supervision session as an illustration of my over-involvement with clients. I was baffled. How could I help being emotionally involved when a client was in crisis?

I thought this agency did not suit me so I began to look for another social work

job. At that time, the frontline workers banded together to oppose the supervisor. Therefore, there was a strong social tie among us. They gave me emotional support. They even looked for job vacancies in newspaper ads for me. At the end of the one-year probation period, the supervisor gave me a negative appraisal. Apart from extending the probation period, she recommended moving me to another centre and changing my job assignment. I did not think it was a fair appraisal. Nonetheless, I accepted the verdict. I handed over my work in the school to a colleague before I moved to another centre. I was pleased that the school principal wanted me to stay because I had done a good job there. In fact, I had done quite well in school social work. Unfortunately, family service made up the larger share of my workload. In retrospect, it was a good experience to me. Because the supervisor was a demanding person, I had to make demands on myself.

A 'black-listed' member becoming a 'rising star'

I had a better time after moving. The supervisor had been a colleague before promotion. I was grateful to her because she was willing to take me although I had been "black-listed" for poor performance. I took up a larger share of family life education. I must have performed very well. She praised my performance. The agency also asked me to teach in a training course and represent the agency at an official function even though I was a junior staff member. I took it as recognition of my good performance. These were the "ups" and "downs" in my professional life.

I like delivering programmes and talks. I like working with parents and teachers. Both school social work and family life education suit me well. We need to work in a service for two or more years before we can be familiar with it and discover our interests. It is better to change early if the service does not suit us because career considerations will make it difficult to change after staying a long time. We would burnout easily in a job that did not interest us, and this would also mean sacrificing our clients.

Social work education is inadequate

I was insecure in beginning practice because of inadequate training. I looked for

a casework job because the casework teacher was a good teacher and an experienced practitioner. Nonetheless, training did not provide me with a solid theoretical base. I had nothing to rely on to cope with my job. For instance, there was a rigorous recording practice in the centre. We were required to document our practice consistently in theoretical language, but I was ill prepared to ground practice on theories. I tried to read up theories and look for reference materials. However, given the tremendous workload, I could not find enough time. This is the reason why some beginners leave the profession. In retrospect, recording helps because it can reveal what future action to take and the use of theories in practice. It is a pity that social workers spend more time on telephone counselling than writing recordings these days.

Beginners need support

In my beginning year, there was a male colleague from my class. In our student days, he performed very well. Soon after taking up the job, he showed signs of work stress. His condition continued to deteriorate. Finally, he decided to leave the profession altogether. He was a casualty of over-involvement with clients. Another male colleague sat next to him. Maybe he was too experienced to empathize with the difficulties of a beginner. He posed such a sharp contrast that could have reinforced the feeling of incompetence in my classmate. Supervisory support is important to beginners because they are susceptible to feeling incompetent or to some unresolved hang-ups when facing a tough case. Peer support is also important. An experienced worker can serve as a mentor to a beginner. I used to ask myself: Would I be helpful to beginners or unhelpful and discourage them? Social work is emotionally taxing. We may suffer from burnout because of the effect of clients' negative emotions on us. It is important for us to stay cheerful and maintain good health. I learned this lesson in my beginning years. The job overtaxed me, but it was not simply overwork. We also feel bad about ourselves for not performing well. I survived those difficult days because of peer support. They are my good friends. They have supported me all along to stay in social work.

Pursuing professional learning and change

Beginners should maximize staff development opportunities. Indeed, social workers should pursue life-long learning. They should have the commitment to update themselves because social work practice requires creative response. However, some social workers think that in-service training will not offer them anything new. They stick to their existing practice. Workplace culture is also a factor. In some centres, professional learning is valued. In my centre, people used to share what they learned in training courses. We used to have informal case conferences to sort things out. However, the workload is so heavy these days that people can no longer afford the time to discuss their work informally.

Recently, the agency has set up a study group to develop a practice approach. Members learn by observing each other's practice on videos. However, this arrangement is only possible if caseloads are reduced. Even then, some workers may find it threatening to make their practice visible to others. I wouldn't feel bad if people gave me negative feedback. If so, my first supervisor would have discouraged me in the first year. We need to improve our practice in response to feedback from colleagues. I also learn from client feedback, probably because I have become more confident. I would demand even more of myself if a client found me helpful. Many experienced workers reject client feedback if it is negative. However, for social workers to develop greater competence depends a lot on whether they are able to change and improve their practice.

Becoming confident and competent

I have been doing well in school social work and family life education. I have received positive feedback from service users, my supervisor and colleagues. They consider me a competent social worker. I can go beyond theories because I am more experienced now. Even though each case is unique, more exposure to cases of similar nature will help. I can integrate theories with my practice experience. I have an integrated model. I am able to ground my programmes on theories. I have a larger stock of theories and I am more deliberate in using them. I feel relaxed even if a client expresses something negative about me, because I am only trying to help. Beginners

will find this stressful. It takes time to build up their confidence. I am now better at work. I feel happy with my job and can obtain personal satisfaction from it.

My reflection on Iris's first story

Iris storied a tough start in an ill-fated beginning year. She weathered it with emotional support from professional peers. After transferring to a new post where she worked in services that “suited” her, she developed her competence in these services and became a ‘rising star’ of the agency. It was a ‘heroic story’ of a social worker riding through the “ups-and-downs” in her professional life to become a competent social worker. The beginning year was difficult for her. She was insecure because she was not able to ground her practice on theories. The insular structure of family service practice intensified her sense of isolation and helplessness. She displayed an egoistic bias, focusing on her anxiety and incompetence. The first story testifies to the hazard of beginning practice and hence the importance of workplace support to beginners.

At the time she told her first story, she impressed me in being very confident of her competence. She could ground her practice on theories and draw on several theories to form an integrated model. She had a large stock of theories at her disposal. She was more deliberate in using these theories. She would not feel threatened even if a client gave her negative feedback. It was not clear what the ‘path’ was like to this stage of competence. Her commitment to pursue professional learning might be one factor. Another factor was the growth of experience. After practising for a sufficiently long time, she had come across many cases of a similar nature where she found familiar experiences and recognized patterns in practice. It also meant more mental space for deliberation, reflection-in-action, and theorizing from experience.

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After the first interview, I had several contacts with Iris on other matters in the next three years. By the time we had the second interview, she had moved up to a

supervisory post. In the interview, she told me a long story of her life as a fresh frontline supervisor. There were two underlying themes: the hazards for an experienced practitioner in taking up a management post and how managerialism changed the scene of social work practice. It was a disheartening story.

A Threatened Beginner Once Again

Second story, 18th July 1997

I was promoted to the supervisory post a few months after our last interview. I didn't really care about promotion. Nonetheless, I was happy because I took it as recognition of my performance. Around that time, I had been looking for a part-time job, partly because I was expecting a baby and wanted more time for my family, and partly because I began to feel stagnant after working for a long time in a job. In fact, I had a job offer from a university. I looked for a teaching job because I thought social work education was important. However, after some senior-level people persuaded me to stay and apply for the promotion post, I gave up the teaching job because it would be ungrateful for me to leave the agency at that point. In retrospect, it was good that I did not change my job. I could enjoy the time with my child even more in being a working mother.

I became a beginner again after taking the supervisory post in another centre. I have had a difficult time here. I did not find job satisfaction or peer support. I am no longer the confident social worker of two years ago. Now, I realize that a good social worker may not make a good administrator. Holding the "supervisor" title does not mean that we can teach frontline workers because many of them have had advanced social work training. Indeed, many frontline workers are sceptical about the idea of supervision if it means advising them what to do. We may still provide support for beginners, but can hardly perform an educational function since there is no time for that. It is a lonely job because we share little common ground with frontline workers. Going to work is stressful. I work as though I were a "fax machine". We have to pass changes down the line to frontline workers even before we can adjust to the changes ourselves. There may be last-minute changes in policy. Although it is beyond our control, people still complain us for making frequent changes!

The workplace is a battleground

The workers here resisted trying out new things. I have faced many challenges from them. Soon after taking up the post, I received a complaint against a long-service worker for being indiscreet. Before I had taken any action, she had already lodged a formal complaint to my superior against me. It taught me a lesson: "Taking the offensive pays!" There were many unpleasant confrontations like this with my subordinates. It hurts because they are mean to me. I face their hostility almost everyday. They challenge me openly and disrespectfully. Even workers from other centres sense the hostile atmosphere. They said, "Your subordinates did not give you 'face'!" A supervisor advised me to warn them, but I could not do this. It is depressing that things have deteriorated so far.

The long-service workers complain most vocally. They influence the new comers to become hostile to me although they are still on probation. Whenever I try to introduce changes, they oppose first and later complain about the delay. I couldn't believe that they are trained social workers. How can they behave one way with a colleague and another way with their clients? The "second-in-charge" is the worst. I used to consult her, but she did not seem to welcome this. Last time, she told me bluntly that she did not have the time. Maybe I should ask her whether she wants to hold the "second-in-charge" position. If she didn't want it, I could appoint another person.

Our centre runs a new model to deliver counselling in a user-friendly way. However, they keep saying that things were not like that in the past. If they want to do things in the old way, I won't mind transferring them to other centres. They have not seen the outside world and that is why they stick to the old way. Staff meetings can wear people out because they keep dwelling on trivial things. During one meeting, a new worker queried the purpose of having these meaningless meetings. It threw me off balance. I used to "freeze up" in difficult situations like this. I explained apologetically, but there is little use explaining to them. I was so depressed that I stopped calling meetings for the next two months.

There was another incident. They claimed compensation leave excessively. Maybe they have a way of "creating" overtime work. What do they do during

working hours? When I expressed my concern, they challenged me for making such claims myself. Some time later, several people applied for a day off at the same time to humiliate me. They are acting even more outrageously now. They are quick to attack my mistakes. I have learned to be careful in what I say. I must be an incompetent supervisor. Otherwise, they wouldn't dare to challenge me openly. I was so depressed at times that I even considered giving up the post to whoever aspired for it. I had asthma for the first time after taking up the post. It must be a psychosomatic symptom. However, I have weathered the toughest time now.

Getting support from other supervisors

I have turned to fellow supervisors for support, including my former boss who recommended my promotion. She has also gone through difficult times with frontline workers in her centre. She advised me that every new supervisor goes through similar experiences. Other supervisors are also sympathetic. They have come across the same kinds of problems. Without their support, I would have quitted long time ago. I have developed a close relationship with another supervisor, K. She has taught me many things. She came to my defence when my subordinates tried to humiliate me before workers from other centres. Recently, she moved to a new centre. There she faced an unfriendly staff group. However, she was able to assert her authority because she is much more senior and is strong in casework. I come from a weak position. I am junior and not strong in casework. I do not have good leadership traits. Indeed, I could not think of any strength I had. That is why people resisted my authority. They hold me accountable for anything they dislike. Even though I was a competent social worker in the past, I could not transfer my practice experience to the supervisor's job. I could not play a social worker's supportive role because I am supposed to manage them. In the past, I might choose to mind my own business. Now, it is a different game. I need to allocate work assignments even if I try to be supportive. It is like giving people "a stick and a carrot" at the same time, be supportive and yet demanding.

A resolve and a new awakening

I want to do a good job. I do not want to let down those people who have thought

highly of me. There is no way to escape from it unless I had not accepted the post in the beginning. The only way out is to keep making demands of people. We have to absorb the hostility of frontline workers. We should prepare ourselves for difficulties along the way unless we have no expectation of the job or ourselves. We may feel threatened initially. However, when we can master it gradually, we become more confident. If we believed in our potential to change, we should have faith in finding the way to make a role change.

I used to think positively. I trusted my resilience to live through it. I could cope with it, but I needed the time to adapt. It is going to be difficult to manage people. It depends on how we approach it and whether we are experienced enough to handle it. I could correct my weaknesses so long as I consulted people when I faced difficulties. Other people may consider me weak in casework, but I have tried my best to improve and keep in touch with direct practice. Even though my subordinates have been difficult, I should see them as benefactors letting me know my weak spots. If not one but four people criticised me for being too accommodating and shifting my position like an amoebae, I should think about it. Maybe they are right! It is not good to win, for this will breed a power struggle. If people spend time plotting how to unseat the supervisor, the centre will become a 'battlefield'.

Lately, I talked to a number of workers about the atmosphere in the centre. They are good people. They advised me to do what I deemed right even if there were objections. Now, I have changed. I find some truth in their criticisms. In the past, I failed to establish a trusting relationship with them, and this had affected my perspective. If I were not confident, I would perceive their comments as hostile and that would be an unhappy experience. However, if I were confident, I would appreciate their candidness in sharing their opinions with me. I should not begin with using power; I would rather begin with understanding. I should strike a balance between control and giving up control. Lately, I have tried to change the atmosphere and the results were good. I asked the "second-in-charge" to explain her discontent. She told me her misgiving about my failure to follow through the decisions made in staff meetings. I learned from this the importance of communication. Maybe the way to work with women is to explain every thing, however trivial it may seem. In the past, they pressed for more explanation even though I had tried my best to explain.

Now I know the reason. They were not asking for explanation; they were expressing their discontent.

In a training course, I learned that people get into conflict because of incompatible personality traits. That explains my difficulty in getting along with the two long-service workers in the centre. They belong to the 'angry' type. They blow up easily. I am the opposite. I yield to other people easily. Lately, I tried a new approach to handle their challenge. I stood firm instead of backing down to avoid conflict. I talked to several people. They thought I had been doing fine. Some supervisors may shy away from doing what I have been doing because they take the easy way out. There is no problem on the surface in their centres. However, there is discontent deep down among workers. Some applied for transfer whilst others came to accept things as they were. I don't want to earn my living in an easy way. Fellow supervisors all hold the view that it has become more difficult to perform our role. There are many uncertainties in a time of change. Frontline workers project their anxiety and their resentment on us. However, we are low down in the organizational hierarchy. We receive new policy directives and instructions from people higher up. Before we can find the time to sort out the details, we have to get things done. Not all the new things are bad. The growing emphasis on service standards and quality will help to screen poor workers out and keep the best people in the service.

Changing perspectives and changing identity

Many workers adopt a lax attitude toward ethics. They turn a professional relationship into a friendship, buying things from their clients or helping them to sell things. People talk about their clients openly in the office. They volunteer off-hand opinions after overhearing a colleague's phone conversation with a client. Sharing views on practice may be helpful, but we need to be prudent and serious about it. They have long interviews because they ask their clients all sorts of questions to satisfy their own curiosity. They fail to prepare recordings on time, and that means they seldom reflect on what they do. They write recordings in a standard format, but the artistry of practice is our sensitivity to our clients' individual uniqueness. Yes, I think like a supervisor, and fellow supervisors are my professional peers now. The change is good for my professional growth. If I stayed in a job for too long, I would

become a lazy worker. Now, I have learned new things, such as how to manage, how to get subordinates to accept my view. I still pursue professional learning, but the focus is more on management.

My reflection on Iris's second story

In the first story, Iris described her professional life as going through “ups-and-downs”. This metaphor carried over into the second story. She began from a high point, receiving promotion to a supervisory post, but soon plunged to a low point as she weathered emotional exhaustion in coping with hostile subordinates. In the interview, she went through the ‘ups-and-downs’, as though it was a re-enactment of her professional life. Towards the end of the interview, she reached a new resolve to face the challenge and found her way.

The second story began when she was at one of the low points in her professional life. She sensed stagnation after working in the same job for too long. Changing to a part-time teaching job is an attractive option for women social workers to accommodate their domestic role. Iris got such a job offer to allow her more time for her maternal duties. Then came the high point. She found her performance greatly valued by the agency. She got promotion to a supervisory post. It meant something new and a boost to professional growth. Once she took up the job, she became a beginner again. It was like a re-play of her experience in the beginning year. First, she was insecure and became overly sensitive to her weakness and incompetence. Second, she felt threatened by hostile subordinates who made life difficult for her, taking advantage of her weakness and incompetence. In the first story, she was a threatened family service worker. In the second story, she was a threatened frontline supervisor.

The main body of the story was a narrative of defeat, humiliation, and feeble defence. Professional peers came to her rescue again, sustaining her emotional strength to cope. It was a re-play of the first story. The storyline made a sharp turn midway. As though she had shed the unhappy past after ventilating her despair and anguish, the better side in her re-surfaced—the resilient, hopeful person who was

committed to doing a good job, and who would stand up to challenge by learning and sheer effort. She declared her resolve to grapple with the challenge, framed the adversity as another opportunity for gaining professional growth, and began to reflect on alternative ways of framing and handling her difficulties in dealing with 'hostile subordinates'.

The second story incorporates many elements of a heroic story about a person taking on a formidable task despite the odds, hardship and emotional cost from a weak position, coming around with the resolve and the action to accomplish it. An underlying life theme threads through Iris's professional life (and probably personal life also). Every time she faced something new, she was stricken by an intense feeling of insecurity. She lost self-confidence and felt threatened, then reached a resolve to meet the new challenge. She was able to tap into peer support at two critical points in her professional life. She was a beginner both times—a beginning family service worker and later a beginning frontline supervisor. We learn an important lesson. Beginners need peer support to weather the difficulty of beginning practice when they are most vulnerable to anxiety and self-doubt.

Beginners take up membership of a discourse community in the work place. They get assurance through workplace conversations that what they do is what other people are doing. Even though Iris used to be a competent social worker when she became a frontline supervisor, she was a beginner nonetheless. She gained her promotion for competence in frontline practice, but the new job called for other competencies she did not possess. The promotion had de-skilled her. How she would be able to learn on the job, as beginners always do, was not clear. She did not have access to discourse resources to interpret her practice experience, unlike a social worker coming across a difficult situation in practice.

Iris was learning nonetheless. She reflected on her experience and came to reframe the meaning of recurrent experiences of hostile confrontation. She arrived at the insight that "it is no good to win" and "I should not begin with using power". In the interview, she made a dramatic change in the storyline when she began to explore how she could persist in doing a good job. She had faith that she could master it in the end if she tried to learn along the way, by reading and taking in-service courses on management. This is a central theme underlying her professional life—pursuing

life-long professional learning to become a better social worker. This is the moral of Iris's story.

Chapter 8

Alan, *The 'Death' of a Frontline Supervisor, a Man's Story*

Alan was the only participant in a supervisory post when I conducted the first interviews with family service participants. He was promoted to this post seven years before. In the beginning of the interview, he appeared somewhat reserved and yet friendly. He loosened up gradually. Nonetheless, the interview still proceeded in a "question-and-answer" kind of conversation. He often pondered on my question a short while, as though he was searching for a right answer, and then replied in a "sanitized" manner, generalizing from his experience but not describing it. Sometimes, he gave hypothetical examples to illustrate his point. However, I had no doubt about his genuineness, or else he would not have risked disclosing himself at some points in the interview.

My Learning Curve Soon Flattened Off

First story, 13th May 1994

Initial social work education was inadequate. It was too brief, covered a few concepts but had little on skills and treatment approaches. I cannot recall how I survived the beginning years. I tried different ways to help my clients, but they were not effective. Life experience might help a bit in working with clients of my age, but not clients in parent-child cases and marital cases. I had to read and look for ways to intervene, but reading only helped in guiding problem analysis, not what to do. I also studied in in-service training courses. However, course content was often fragmented. Conceptually, I could pick up something about a problem or a practice approach and a few skills. At the end of a course, I used to make conscious attempts

to apply what I had learnt. In those days, I put more emphasis on using formal knowledge in practice. Therefore, I spent more time on reading and planning. I would attend more to things that I was interested in, could retain, or over which I had some degree of mastery.

In later years, I put much less effort into reading and planning. Maybe I had more knowledge, or maybe I was lazy. I became less active in attending workshops and training courses because they were not so helpful now, and because I was able to learn from experience to deal with problems in practice. I recall a case in the beginning years. A mentally ill client was on medication after discharge from the hospital. Initially, I did not monitor his medication. He relapsed. From then on, I made a point of encouraging clients to follow their doctor's prescription, and monitored whether they still complied if there were side effects or if they were getting better. Another thing I learned was to detect the precursors of imminent relapse. I would study a client's temperament and identify the kind of events that were stress inducing. I could then take pre-emptive action. We would have found these ideas in textbooks, but we do not take note of them until we came across some related experiences.

I also consulted my colleagues when I came across difficult cases. It was informal. I had some pointers in picking the colleague to consult. First, people differed in the type of cases in which they were proficient. Second, some workers were more resilient in their effort to help clients. I would judge what might work before trying out their ideas. We had case conferences also. Usually, a colleague would present a theory and illustrate how s/he applied it in a case. I might pick up some ideas about the theory, but would not be able to master it in practice. It would take a year or so for me to study an approach, talk to colleagues, and try to apply it in practice before I could attain some degree of mastery.

Discerning patterns and finding a specialist focus

I used to have five or six mental health cases in the beginning year. I noticed that there were more Christians in my caseload. Therefore, I had this question in

mind: "Will religion be of influence to them?" Indeed, I am more interested in discerning patterns than direct practice when I read my colleagues' case recordings, I am able to recognize patterns after reading about a variety of families and problems in a large number of cases. For instance, many Thai women desert their family after giving birth to a baby. Often their husband is much older and works in a low-status job. I am more interested in this kind of sociological analysis than direct practice. Recognizing an emerging pattern is the first step toward the development of a sociological perspective.

I became aware of my interest in mental health cases after working for two or three years. I noticed that I was effective with such cases but not others. Since then, I have spent more time on these cases. I read more on this area and reflected more on my practice. Some years later, I took a postgraduate diploma course on mental health. Whilst it did not turn me into an expert, it did provide me with more knowledge in that area. In my dissertation, I explored the relationship between Christian beliefs and mental health, a hypothesis derived from the pattern recognized in my beginning practice. In supervision, I am also interested in examining mental health cases. Once, I picked up from reading the idea that it was desirable to minimize face-to-face contact between a mental patient and her/his family members in high "expressed emotion" families. I recalled this idea and introduced it to my colleague in a supervision session. I seldom discuss family therapy with my colleagues because the concepts are not so accessible. I am also interested in elderly cases. Some colleagues do not like to work with old people. I think people's preference has to do with their personality, past experience, and personal interest. It makes good sense that caseload profile should vary with people.

Conception of competence and 'good practitioner'

Some colleagues have little more than one year's experience. However, they are already competent in working with certain type of cases. When I studied their recordings, I found that the treatment method resembled what we read in textbooks. I would not have handled the case better than they did. Frontline workers have

access to each other's practice through informal case discussions on the method used, the case development, and the outcome, whilst I have access to people's practice through studying their recordings and having case discussion with them during supervision sessions. I think there are criteria for assessing a social worker's competence. My colleagues may have adopted a similar, if not identical, set of criteria. However, there is going to be a managerial perspective in my supervisory role, such as whether the worker is cooperative and willing to take up work assignments. I think attitude is important. A good practitioner looks at things in a positive way and instils hope in the client. If a person described his/her practice in detail, I think I could identify her/his level of competence. I can identify the good practitioners in the staff group, although other colleagues may not agree with my judgements.

The risk of becoming experienced

We gave more thought to a case in the beginning years because we were not so confident then. Also, we could afford the time since our caseload was not heavy. However, with a heavier caseload, we would begin to practise in a matter-of-fact manner, either because we were more confident or because we became indifferent. For instance, when an elderly client asked for help, we would have some ideas about the kind of problems that s/he might have and the kind of tangible service s/he would need. We tend to follow a pattern in approaching certain types of case. Maybe this is a phenomenon of "routinization" in our practice. Alternatively, we may rationalize that social workers are knowledgeable about the service needs of elderly clients and therefore efficient in lining up services for them. However, unlike a beginner who will attend to the client's need and come up with more options, making a quick match may sometimes prevent experienced workers from finding creative ways of helping clients. Therefore, experience works both ways. On the one hand, we become more familiar with our work and afford to think less. On the other hand, this may foreclose our professional development because we no longer give much thought to our practice.

Review of a fourteen-year social work career

I have been in the social work profession for over fourteen years. In the first seven years, I was a frontline worker. In the last six to seven years, I was in a managerial position. I had more hands-on experience when I was in frontline work. I still take cases now, but many fewer. The trade-off is that I can acquire a broader spectrum by reading other social workers' case recordings. I can pick up more ways to help clients, though I do not know much about the "how". I still regard myself as a beginner. I am not so competent in counselling skills. Whilst my counselling practice has changed somewhat over the years, the change has never been substantial. I may be faster in grasping the nature of the problem and the treatment method. I may have greater confidence in implementing treatment plans. Nonetheless, there is still not much progress. People's learning curve varies, depending on a person's interest, potential, and effort. In my case, there has been improvement with the increase of experience, but the learning curve soon flattened off.

My reflection on Alan's first story

Alan was the only participant at a supervisory position at the time I conducted the first round of interviews. He was the only participant telling me that he was not interested in frontline practice. He could not learn the 'how' from initial social work education, but learned it from mistakes and oversight in practice. Like Sally and Flora in their beginning year, his preoccupation was to master a theory to guide his practice. Maybe all beginners are concerned about the 'how' because they need to know what to do in client contacts. He discovered his interest in sociological analysis of social life, not direct practice. In this regard, he was different from the rest of the family service participants. For the latter, direct practice was central to their professional life. They derived professional learning from it. If he was not particularly strong in direct practice, how did he supervise frontline workers?

The first story revealed little about his experience and the meaning he made of

it. There was a crude picture of how he learned and how he discovered his interest in mental health cases in his early years of frontline practice. As he became more experienced, he began to spend less time on reading and planning. Increasingly, he felt he was performing the same routine day in and day out. His learning curve leveled off. Thus, more experiences may not be good for social workers. It may lead to the closure of professional development. (In the second interview a few years later, he admitted that he was indeed feeling stagnant around that time.) Irene considered changing to a part-time teaching job because she began to sense stagnation after staying in the job for too long. Will every social worker feel stagnate at some point in her/his professional life? Alan has stayed in the supervisory job for seven years. Is that long enough to feel stagnant again? He did not talk about his experience as a frontline supervisor. Indeed, he revealed little about his experience in his social work career. In the interview, he sounded like a disinterested observer describing another person's career, a stark contrast to the interview with Irene.

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Alan had moved to another centre when I phoned him to set up our second interview. He suggested meeting me in the following week. He wanted to help my study. I did not recognize his face immediately, but his demeanour was familiar to me—a polite, gentle approach. I warmed up the atmosphere by talking about his interest in mental health cases.

Contemplating Career Change at Mid-life

Second story, 22nd December 1997

I am still interested in mental health practice. However, I could not do much about it apart from spare time reading. The agency has lately initiated a “mental health project” and asked me to join, probably because of my interest in this area. I have also enrolled in a training workshop on mental health practice to refresh my

knowledge. Except for these new ventures, there is little professional development in this area. I have also attended a few training workshop on topics like Solution-focused Therapy. I picked up a few ideas. However, since I have no direct practice now, I soon forgot what I learned.

There has been little change since the last interview. I am now in charge of a new team and a new centre. The team is smaller, but I have to supervise three services, including family life education, which is new to me. The workers in this service were experienced and do not need guidance from me. Nonetheless, it is demanding looking after three services since everything is multiplied by three. I cannot really go deeply into any one service. The actual workload is more than one would expect of a supervisor for a seven-member team. It will be better for me to concentrate on one thing because I may then attend to details. I do not like handling several things simultaneously because it means not doing anything properly. Likewise, the agency should review the present arrangement of having frontline workers providing two or three services. Although there is the advantage of broadening workers' exposure, the disadvantage is that workers have to cope with a heavy caseload and become a generalist, not being good at anything.

The intersection of the 'personal' and the 'professional'

I discovered my interest in mental health practice incidentally in the course of frontline practice. In addition, I like working with old people too. Whilst many social workers would simply wait-list their clients for tangible service and then forget them, I would attend to their emotional needs and maintain close relationships with them. Rather than simply arranging tangible services for them, the main thing it is to give them support because they are deserted by their family kin and feel lonely. I would even attend to things they did not bring up. I think this may have to do with my childhood experience. I was the only child in the family. My maternal grandmother looked after me when I was a child. Perhaps I have projected my affection for her to my clients. I did not find them troublesome. I could work with them easily. I am still interested in working with old people these days. To develop my expertise in this area, I should read more and practise more.

However, I do not have casework in the supervisory post. I can only read or discuss the work of frontline workers in supervision sessions. It is one step away from the actual practice.

A mid-life review of a social work career

Although it is not a “female” service, there are many more female than male workers in family service. In the past, I did not find this special. However, in recent years, I have sensed loneliness working in a family service setting. Usually, women are strong in verbal skills. They tend to care about trivial things. In discussions, I find it difficult to get my point through to them. They always have the upper hand, even though their argument is weak. Sometimes, we get stuck on trivial issues in meetings. If there were only male colleagues in the meeting, we could get to the point much faster and arrive at a consensual decision. There is no way to win an argument with female colleagues. However, if we allow them to prevail, the decision will certainly be a bad one because they are narrow in perspective. I could argue with them, but this would easily hurt their feelings—though they seldom care about mine. I cannot express myself freely in their presence, and this may have affected my professional development. Where the gender composition was more balanced, I was able to express myself better.

In the past few years, I have had the feeling that life is like a routine—going to work and getting things done. I had no vision—finding people’s needs, setting a direction, and taking new initiatives. With so many new things coming up these days, it is exhausting to cope with them. Not adding any more new things is already a contribution. I do not oppose good initiatives, but I cannot find any. At the time I took up the supervisory job, I had vision. It was a new job. I tried to learn and discharge my duties properly. Gradually, I was able to master the job. However, like a rising learning curve reaching a plateau, I began to feel stagnant later. I then looked for further development to perform the job better. However, there are so many new things that I feel overloaded these days. I do not even have time to digest the paper-flow. I wonder if other supervisors have similar experiences. I feel

stagnant. I am still serious and responsible in carrying out my tasks, but I have lost my initiative.

There is little prospect of career advancement. Among those who are eligible for job promotion, I am not the smartest. I accept a dead-end career. Nonetheless, I still want to find a vision to sustain an active approach to my job. If I can find it, it is already a kind of career advancement for me. It need not be grandiose. It can be something ordinary but with new meaning. I have considered finding a new job in another field, but it is not a strong desire yet. I have thought about taking up a church-sponsored venture in mental health service or social work teaching. I supervised two students once, but it was a lacklustre experience even though I had tried very hard to teach them.

I am not sure whether there is clear stage-progression in my professional life. In crude terms, the first stage covers the period from the beginning of my social work career to promotion. From thereon is the second stage. Now, it may be the time to begin a new stage. In the first seven or so years of frontline practice, I was exploring whether I liked being a social worker. I tried to familiarize myself with working methods and skills. Crudely speaking, it was a reflective, maturing stage. I entered into the second stage after becoming a supervisor. I decided to stay longer in social work because it would take time for me to be familiar with the job before I could make my contribution. I pursued further study to get a better understanding of social work so that I would be able to contribute more. Before that, I had deferred taking this step in anticipation of a career change. Nonetheless, I felt stagnant again after some time, and the question of whether or not to stay in social work re-surfaces now.

I am forty and feel I am coming to the end of a life-stage for a mid-life evaluation. Should I stay in social work as a life-long career? It is meaningful work, but gradually I feel stagnant. I have thought about studying theology and becoming a priest, or entering law practice. I have been active in my church and theology has always been my interest. My interest in law practice stemmed from my experience in accompanying clients to seek legal advice. I noticed that lawyers gave my clients

only short answers. I thought, "If I were a lawyer, I would be much more responsive to my clients." I also found that people did not respect social workers' professionalism. Even lay people have some ideas about the "what" and "how" of social work. Intellectually, it is not stimulating. I think people will regard me a professional if I became a lawyer. In fact, I completed a law course two years ago. Now, I am thinking whether or not to complete the one-year qualifying course of the Bar Association. I am ambivalent about this because it would mean giving up the security and stability that the present job provides. Entering law practice will also mean a much longer workday. However, by far the most important consideration is the meaning of social work to me. I think I would miss the work of social work, not social work as a profession.

If I decided to stay in social work, I need to have a vision, some "re-integration", and further development in things other than practice, say, researching into a phenomenon. On a ten-point scale, I would rate the present job 6 or 7. I still like it, though not to the extent of liking it very much. I can afford a career change at the age of forty. I still consider myself young enough to make a change, probably because I am not married. In a few more years' time, it will be difficult for me to start a new career.

My reflection on Alan's Second Story

I could make better sense now of why he sounded like a disinterested observer in his first story. Increasingly, he sensed early closure in his social work career. He was labouring on many new things that he did not believe in. He had lost his vision and was not sure whether he would be able to recover it. The second story went through a mid-life review of his social work career. It is a man's story of thwarted development, promise not realised, and waning hope after working seventeen or more years in a women's profession that promised him the professionalism he had aspired to when he chose to study social work. As it turned out, he was trapped in a job that constrained his development because he was too exhausted to be able to

pursue his professional interest (in mental health cases) or find a vision for the team that he was supposed to lead. He was carrying out a management practice that had generated “too many new things” for frontline supervisors to handle. Irene had made a similar point—working like a ‘fax machine’. Whilst Irene welcomes these new things, Alan does not find them worthwhile.

Moving to a new team has worsened the situation. Even though the team is smaller, the workload is in fact heavier because he has to supervise three services, but he can do none properly. There is a gender dimension to the second story. He is the only male worker in an all-women team. He is caught in a no-win battle to find personal meaning in his work because these women social workers tend to block his way. In the main body of the second story, he vented his frustration in finding no future for his social work career. At the age of forty, he is stuck in a state of stagnation. He is about to make an important decision of a mid-life career change. His story reminds me of the play *The Death of the Salesman*. Professional life is part of a person’s life-span development. At mid-life, Alan asked himself this question: Will social work still deserve to be his life-long career? It is not promising at this point. He has other options. He may change to law practice. He may study theology. However, he is not ready to give up social work yet. The work of helping people is still appealing to him.

After writing Alan’s story and reflecting on it, I pondered this question: Should there be professional development for frontline managers? If there is no room for direct practice in a profession whose mission is to help, a social worker turned manager necessarily looks in some other directions for professional growth. Failing that, stagnation may lead to *The Death’ of a Frontline Supervisor!*

Chapter 9

Venus, Sticking it out in a Life Career to Help People

Venus was the last participant I met in the first series of interviews. She was not on the participant list originally. Iris, whom I interviewed first, told me that Venus would like to take part. I had collected the first story from all the participants by the time I had the first interview with her. She asked me what impression I had of these interviews. I told her the common themes that had emerged thus far, and the variations in emphases and preoccupations among the stories.

Learning a New Social Work Time and Again

First story, 26th May 1999

I graduated with a degree in psychology. For the first two years, I was a special education teacher. I entered social work while helping my church to set up a centre for the elderly. They invited me to carry out the start-up work as the only paid worker. I thought it was a way to serve God, so I accepted. Initially, it was mainly administrative work. After the centre came into being, the work changed to organizing centre-based activities and collaborating in joint projects with other community groups. I could manage the job even though I was untrained. My psychology background helped me to understand old people. I was able to arrange referrals for tangible service. However, relationship problems were beyond my ability. Therefore, I decided to study social work for the professional qualification and to equip myself. I enrolled in a full-time MSW programme after working two years as an untrained worker. The programme spoon-fed students with theories. I could only try out a few easier theories in my placements. However, I was fortunate to have good fieldwork teachers, so I felt prepared for practice, casework in particular.

Learning social work in the probation service

I began my social work career as a probation officer. I lacked confidence. Everything was new—clients, court reports, and the way to practise. It was a different kind of social work. Workers and clients were opponents. Clients would trick their worker. Although I did not trust them, I did not know how to cross-examine them. In-service training did not help. It only covered elementary stuff. I could get advice from the supervisor on what to attend to and the recommendation to make. Most of the time, I learned by observing how experienced workers interviewed clients. I was not able to make use of theories. The experience was like trying out new things from scratch. I might have used behavioural modification in a crude way, like praising a client for good behaviour. At first, it upset me that clients did not change even though I had been good to them. Later, my colleagues advised me to play tough to get clients' compliance, and I began to try both ways.

Social work education did not teach me how to reach a judgement that would affect a client's future in a short interview. I worked under pressure to get reports ready for the court. I had less than five minutes to read a case file before a client interview. Apart from collecting information, I could not do any casework in a one-hour interview. I processed my clients like a "merry-go-round" with little time to deliberate what would be good for them. Yet, my report would have an important bearing on the court's decision. I often advised the judge to send clients to institutions because there was no treatment resource to help them and their families were often too weak to control them. It was a reluctant choice. In cases with several defendants, several workers would share a case. We shared information from different sources, crosschecked the information we got, and tried to reach a collective decision or gauge if there would be discrepancies in the recommendations we made to the judge. At first, I thought we should agree on the general direction. However, I discovered later that people had different views. I had to make my own judgement.

I became more independent later, and was able to make better judgements. Somehow, I had found some guidelines for my practice. I cannot describe how this emerged. It took the form of an assessment model—go this way if the client is like this and that way if the client is like that. Of course, I did not find it easy to make a

judgement even with this model since I would not be able to undo what was done. Increasingly, I relied on myself since we could afford little time for peer consultation. I would consult my colleagues only when I was insecure with the judgement I made. In retrospect, the first job was like a “mystery”. I could not pinpoint the micro-skills used and the theoretical framework adopted to guide my assessment. It would be much easier for me to pick up the probation job now that I am an experienced worker.

Learning social work in family service

I left the probation service a year and a half later and changed to the present job. Family service differs greatly from probation. Cases are more diversified. Workers follow their clients in the conversational process instead of following a standard format to collect information. I had to make some adjustments because I had a number of job assignments new to me, but it was not as difficult as in the first job. I was able to find my way through reading and consulting people. Also, there was time off for attending seminars and courses. Hence, there was more space for me to learn and relate learning to my working.

In beginning practice, I could listen to a client for an hour and yet did not grasp the essence. In social work education, I learned family therapy in a purely theoretical way. I did not know how to put concepts into practice. We cannot ask a client “What is “family power” in your family like?” We need to pick up useful information through observation and interaction with the client. My supervisor was very helpful in this regard. She showed me how a theory could lend a perspective for analysing a case and what I had overlooked. Apart from in-service training, I think we need to read, discuss cases with other workers, and try out new ideas. I learn by observation and direct experience. In a workshop on the Satir model, I enacted the model in a simulation exercise. I could follow the steps to guide the client. I could grasp the essence and reproduce it in a succinct way. When I tried it out with my clients, some overt features of the model were there. Of course, it should not be like a behavioural copy. We need to grasp the theoretical base first and express the ideas in practice behaviours. It is like “trial-and-error”, but with a sense of direction. We would know what it is like to use a theory after having the experience of using it. If I found it

worked, I would continue to use it.

Becoming more competent

In the beginning years, I was insecure facing clients and novel situations. I was uneasy. I stuttered. I lost focus. I was led by my client. Now, I can identify the crux of the problem after talking to the client for a while. I have clear notions of what I am doing or going to do. If the client resists change, I know what is happening and I would wait or try other strategies. I have more knowledge. I feel more confident with the growth of experience. Now, I am able to follow a theoretical framework in my practice. I dwell on what I consider the problem area. I have better ideas of where to go. I can master theoretical stuff and present it to other people in a simplified way. There are many theories available. I want to find out the one that suits me and integrate different theories since we cannot rely solely on one. These changes come from my effort and interest. I strive to master practice skills in order to become a good social worker. I need to learn.

My reflection on Venus's first story

Venus chose a social work career to help people as her way to serve God. She was clear about the nature of social work and her commitment to it after working as an untrained worker for two years. She storied how she grappled with beginning practice, first as a probation officer and later as a family service worker. Her experience differed because of the demands of different setting.

Beginning social workers likely find it difficult to work in the probation service because the work is about social control, not helping. A probation officer makes recommendations to assist the judicial system to reach a decision that affects a person's future. S/he will interview the probationer for less than an hour before arriving at a judgment, write a probation report, and then close the file. Venus had to carry out this mode of practice after a short induction course. The 'social work' she practiced was a world apart from that of initial social work education. All the things she learned—social work theories, social work values, helping relationship—were

irrelevant to this mode of practice. There was a large margin of uncertainty in reaching a recommendation based on an interview. She learned it by trying it out and consulting her colleagues. Gradually, she could discern patterns and evolve a personal assessment model. Both Venus and Flora learned on the job a tradition of practice unlike the one taught in initial social work education. A question looms large: Does it mean that initial social work education is largely irrelevant to beginners?

Working in a family service setting was very different. Venus could develop professionally. At first, she still felt insecure and uneasy in beginning practice. She lost focus in counselling. However, after she became experienced, she had a clear sense of direction. She had a better grasp of theories and was able to ground her on theoretical frameworks. Seen in this light, professional development is directional. With Venus, it showed in changes in her practice—greater control, increasing intentionality, and intelligent action that is guided by theories. Like Shirley, Venus has attained a state of mastery in practice that corresponds to the conventional image of an expert practitioner. The developmental trajectories of these two practitioners are similar to each other up to this point—a movement toward control and certainty in practice.

* * * * *

I contacted Venus again toward the end of 1997 to set up our second interview. She declined, explaining that she was busy with some personal matters, and agreed to call me later. I waited several months in vain. I phoned her again in May the following year. To my relief, she accepted. She had declined last time because her mother was seriously ill. She was not in the mood. She was also busy clearing case recordings to prepare for the Private Data Ordinance.

To Persevere in a Time of Discontent

Second story, 22nd May 1998

I was very busy at that time. Because of the Private Data Ordinance, everyone was working extremely hard to clear case recordings. The agency issued warning

letters to those who failed to do so. We also changed our recording practice. We only entered factual information and avoided impressionistic statements. We were careful about our wording and kept our recordings brief. However, it is difficult not to form impressions since diagnosis does involve judgement. Now, recordings are prepared for the public instead of our use. People make entries like “counselling on dating and family relationship”. We give up analysing and re-organizing case information for periodic review. We need to obtain client consent for everything. Whilst it is good to protect client data, it also imposes constraints on us.

We are going down the Social Welfare Department’s path, following their recording system and the way to practice casework. We are required to identify achievable goals in a case plan, so people put down good statements like “having monthly contact with the client” to meet the standard. We make daily entry of every phone call and interview, complete recording everyday, and close case files within five years even though case files are often re-opened later. It is a waste of time playing this game. We used to publish our practice experience, but we cannot afford the time now. We work like a dog. Agency administrators failed to consider the whole thing carefully. We are going to pay a high price for this. However, we are only “small potatoes”. We can do nothing. Morale is low.

A new conception of social work practice

In retrospect, the two-year training in the M.S.W. programme was very inadequate. It was too generic, too broad, global and superficial, covering bits of this and that. However, we need to try out different things to find what interests us before devoting our life to one specialist area. I have found it after all these years. I am comfortable with counselling. Now, I want to find out whether the theories are adequate. It is not enough to acquire an approach and practise it in a thorough way. It is not as simple as following steps. Some therapies like Solution-focused Therapy may look simple. However, simply using “miracle questions” will not work. The client does not respond in a predictable way. The case situation is unpredictable. There are many issues. It depends on how we apply it and reflect along the way.

In the past, I was concerned only about my theoretical base. It was weak. Now, I

realize that life experience is also important, and that explains why beginning practice is difficult. Beginners have to cope with a variety of life situations new to them, such as unwed pregnancy, sex, marital intimacy, death and dying. Books cover many things, but not at the level of the individual. We understand another person's experience by way of our own life experience, before we can join that person in the counselling process. I was too idealistic when I was a beginning counsellor. I held an ideal image of a healthy family and good parenting. Therefore, I found many families pathological and often criticized my clients. These were what theories said. However, gradually, I discovered that things were not like that in real life. I began to question my ideas and beliefs. Will this way of parenting definitely work? Am I able to perceive another person's difficulty? We should not begin with an ideal picture. We should see life as it is. Foremost, we need to attend to individual circumstances and help a client to find the source of difficulty and use her/his resources. I used to fit families into a mould. Now, I learn from my experience that we need to understand a problem in its individual context and go slowly.

Another thing is self-involvement and the "use of self". How can I help another person? Why did this approach work but not another approach? Why am I not able to use this approach? Does my personality fit this approach? I need to bring my self in to become part of the system and influence it. I need to examine how to use a theory. Integration involves bringing my life experience and personality to tie into theories and therapies. The personal and the professional are related. The personal enters our practice. Our professional life feeds back to our personal life. There will be transference when you are actively involved in the counselling process. It will affect the way we help other people if we are unable to put ourselves on guard and monitor ourselves. I begin to see things from this new perspective.

Studying and learning about practice

When I failed a case, I realized that I was not knowledgeable. In recent years, I have attended family therapy courses conducted by a trainer. They had a strong impact on me, far more powerful than my experience in fieldwork placements. The trainer studied our taped interviews 'frame by frame'. We began at the theoretical level, examined why we adopted this way of looking at the case. We then explored

the reason for getting such and such a reaction from the client. We examined client disclosure at a deeper level, including its non-verbal content. We studied each other's practice, identified what had gone wrong, and picked up some insights. For instance, "individuation" in family therapy remained a concept until I observed its expression in practice and understood how individuation could be a problem. I was then able to grapple with the concept in a concrete manner. Thence, theories come to life. I can see how these ideas find expression in people's lives, how things turn into a problem, how and why family conflicts go underground, why people find life so painful. I have applied such concepts in my own family life and found personal growth. I weathered a serious health problem and a very difficult period in my family in the past year. The experiences have affected my way of looking at life and helped me to stretch myself. I became more capable of understanding other people, in dealing with pain and facing conflicts, and of helping my clients go through difficult times in their life. I have learned to work in a more down-to-earth manner.

This kind of training has contributed considerably to self-improvement and professional growth. It has rendered my practice visible to professional peers and shed light on "my shadow" in practice. For instance, I used to act like an educator, to focus on communication and problem-solving in working with couples. After learning about my practice style, I began to question it. "I've already done all these things and yet it doesn't turn out right. Is there anything wrong?" Gradually, it dawned on me that it failed because of the quality of interaction with my clients. They would see it as "put down". In the past, I listened only to the surface-level meaning and failed to appreciate the implicit meaning. I have been learning in this manner in recent years. Every year, I attended a training programme that spanned four months and covered fifteen sessions. I have learned a lot from the trainer's model of supervision, particularly the way to look at a case. Later, I joined a group of trainees to pursue self-directed learning in our own time. We studied expert practice recorded on video. It has been helpful. In retrospect, social work education is inadequate, but I am not putting all the blame on the training institutions. I also blame myself for not learning the stuff well enough and bringing vague ideas into fieldwork when I was a student.

Looking back to see ahead

I spot a few things raised four years ago. We should follow our own development. I was in an educator role in special education. My first social work job was in elderly service. I was looking for a career that would suit me. I was in a social control role in the probation service. Now in family service, I control resources and provide counselling. In the search for a path to help people, I have tried many things in social work. I want to be a helper. After nine years of direct practice, I have begun to consider whether to take up an administrative or training job in the next stage of my professional career. I have sufficient seniority to be eligible for promotion. There are three options open. The first option is to stay in frontline work and not seek promotion. The second is to apply for promotion to an administrative position. Once I was about to apply but dropped the idea because my mother was very ill at that time. Now that she has passed away, I begin to consider it again. I used to crave for promotion. I wanted to help my colleagues and share my experience with them. However, I would not like working full-time in an administrative job although I am sure I could manage it well. Having served as the “second in-charge” and the “acting in-charge”, I have some ideas about the workload. With the new “bringing-up” system and all sorts of recent changes, the workload is going to be very heavy. There will not be many opportunities for a supervisor to train frontline workers or take cases. I doubt whether I can accomplish anything. I am not going to seek promotion now. I do not like the present recording practice nor agree with the trend of development. I do not want to be a part of it.

At one point, there was the talk about creating a senior practitioner post. This might suit me. However, if the agency wants value for money and gives me twenty or thirty difficult cases, I would be hard-pressed. This is not for me to consider now since the post does not exist. The third option is to enter into social work teaching as a fieldwork instructor. In the early years of my social work career, I craved for new things. I think people look for achievement when they are young. Now, I would like to go for expertise in a specialised area. However, I have reached mid-life when I begin to look inward and want to settle down rather than to move on. As of now, I am able to pursue learning and practice casework. I don't want any more changes.

My reflection on Venus's second story

The second story conveys a depressed mood of disappointment, anguish, and cynicism about what was happening to social work. Venus was cynical about the absurdity of overzealous measures to manage social workers and their work. However, like many social workers, she could only speak silence even though it was her practice at stake. Alan was the agent to implement this management practice. She was the object of this practice. They were on opposite sides of the divide. Yet, they agreed on one thing—caught in a game that diverted them from doing worthwhile things.

However, Venus could hold on to a private space not yet spoiled by over-management, in which she could “practise casework and pursue learning”. Within that private space, there was the promise of professional growth. She had found a new conception of practice. Previously, she prized the ability to control by grounding her practice on theories. Now she looked inward to restore the place of the ‘self’ in practice where the ‘personal’ and the ‘professional’ intersect to create a space for helping others. In the first story, she prized the mastery of a practice approach. Three years later, she was still searching for it, but she was not looking for the ‘Holy Grail’ that Shirley had found in her first story.

Like Shirley who had discovered the role of her life experience in practice, Venus also had the same discovery that she could understand another person’s experience only by way of her life experience. She had come to grips with the moral-ethical nature of social work. It was not for her to judge what is good for another person. She relinquished her professional authority because theories do not represent real life. Shirley also arrived at the same insight in her second story—human action is too complex to conform to a single normative standard.

There is another close resemblance between these two social workers. Shirley prized the mastery of theories and therapy models in her first story. In the second story, she came to grips with the importance of listening and understanding in social work helping. Venus arrived at a similar conception of practice—to see life as it is

from the client's perspective and respect her/his capacity for self-determination. The same lesson should have been taught in initial social work education. However, she was not able to learn it at that time because she did not have the experience to interpret its meaning.

Venus had another discovery (rediscovery)—the 'use of self' in practice. In the past, using a theory in practice was akin to using a tool. Now, she knows what it entails to use theories in practice. The 'self' is implicated when she "tied in" theories with her life experience and personality. Shirley has also articulated this view. Both reached the same conclusion—the personal is intertwined with the professional. Venus has found a way to 'unpack theories' (Shirley's notion of "working out a theory in practice") and to expose her "shadow" in practice, that is, greater reflexivity in practice.

Looking ahead, she echoed the same sentiment that Alan conveyed in his mid-life review—social work is no longer promising. Whilst Alan might make a mid-life career change, Venus would weather it through. A prime force behind her developmental trajectory was her personal commitment to find a life project of helping people. She found counselling. She may not have her voice heard against the tide of managerialism, but she holds the power to pursue good social work within the autonomous zone of practice. Every frontline worker holds this power.

Chapter 10

Yvonne, in a Life-long Project of Professional Learning

Yvonne obtained her social work diploma in 1983, entered degree-level training in 1986, and started her present job after graduating. She storied a tough beginning of her social work career and her struggle to become a better social worker.

Finding a 'Weapon' for Competent Practice

First story, 19th June 1994

There were two stages: the diploma-stage and the degree-stage. Initial training failed to help me with practice. I picked up only the names of therapies and models, but I was not able to use them. Neither could I learn practice skills from laboratory training. In fieldwork, the supervisor was unhelpful. I was to conduct a women's group. He advised me to give a talk on laundry work in the first session because housewives would be interested in this. It was a boring session. I lacked programme skills. I was incompetent, but I could not get any help from him. There was no one to show me the "what" and "how" of social work. My field partner thought he was a good teacher, and some senior-year students also thought so. Therefore, I thought this was my problem. I did not dare to ask his help because, at the beginning of the placement, he said he would not tolerate stupid questions. When my classmates asked how I felt about the placement, I lied to protect my self-image. My experience in the placement had shattered my self-confidence. It worked against the aim of professional training. I began my social work career with no confidence at all.

Re-gaining confidence in beginning practice

My first job was at a "children and youth centre". I was responsible for a "lay

counsellor project” and some women’s groups. I was not knowledgeable about counselling or organizing volunteers. A classmate working in another centre had a similar assignment so we could support each other. I became more confident working with her but I still did not manage the “lay counsellor project” well. I had to provide counselling training to the volunteers. I managed to stay one step ahead of them by reading up textbooks. I also brought in outside trainers. However, the feedback remained discouraging. Dropout was high during the training period. The demands of the cases the volunteers took on were beyond their abilities. I could not help much since I was not strong in casework. In the following year, the project was still problematic, but I did not dare to change course. There was no one around to advise me. The project became a “torture”. Nonetheless, my performance was still better than that of my colleagues. The supervisor even praised me. I could ask him the questions I did not dare to ask my teachers as a student. I began to examine the nature of social work, the direction of counselling, and how to render social work more professional. I also questioned the work of youth centres. Should it be counselling, women’s service, interest classes, and those routine activities? I was committed to the development of group work and youth work. I tried to find answers from in-service training courses, but none could show me the way. I felt stagnant after working in the centre for three years. Therefore, I decided to seek further study.

Continuing social work education is all jokes

In the degree programme, the non-social work part of the curriculum helped us considerably to develop a critical view of social problems and social work’s response to them. I enjoyed the intellectual input. By contrast, the social work part of the curriculum was all “jokes”. The same teachers as those I had had in the diploma course re-cycled the same material. The casework teacher churned out terms but little substance about practice. We had empty talks about casework plans in seminars, but writing a casework plan is not the same as practising casework. In fieldwork placements, we played a “language game” of writing practice accounts in a theoretical language to show how we successfully applied a counselling approach. By comparison, I learned more about practice problems from discussion with my classmates.

Another cycle of beginning practice

After graduating from the degree programme, I joined this agency. At first, I was able to write casework plans but not engage or motivate my clients. I did not know how to tackle “underlying problems”, like the client’s personality or her marital difficulty that contributed to her parenting problems. The supervisor could only help in a limited way because it was impossible for her to advise me on every case. Neither did she give me practical guidance. I must have made many mistakes at first but I did not see them as my mistakes because I could not admit my incompetence. Instead, I blamed the clients for being unmotivated and uncooperative. At times, I was so upset that I became impatient with them. Once, I became pushy with a client because she was inactive. Fortunately for me, I could discuss my work with colleagues. They were open and supportive. They shared their experience with me. A colleague said this would make the client resistant. My feelings would undermine my practice. “We are just human beings after all,” they counselled me. “We shouldn’t regard ourselves as responsible for the outcome, whether it is perfect or not.” Now that I have worked for six years, I can tell why I made those mistakes in the beginning. I lacked knowledge, skills, self-awareness, and emotional control. The outcome would be better if I practised in a different way. I am not so pushy these days. I opt for those changes that are easier for the client to achieve. I think peer support is very important to beginners because they are uncertain about what to do and are vulnerable to negative feelings. Even to date, I look for reassurance from my colleagues in informal case discussions. Now, the majority of the workers here are young. I am more experienced than most and many beginners seek advice from me. Rather than undermining their confidence by pointing out their mistakes, I offer them alternatives that may work.

A ‘weapon’ to aid competent practice

We should join in-service training courses to improve our casework practice. I have studied several therapeutic approaches. I have learned a lot from a course on Brief Therapy. We studied our taped counselling sessions in a group. The trainer showed us the way to look at the case, the entry points and dead-ends. I have formed a group with two other colleagues to study Brief Therapy. I now understand this

therapy better, and I have a better grasp of a case and what intervention to make. I am more confident now because I have a “weapon” to aid my practice. However, a weapon may lose its effect. Therefore, it is important to find new learning and try it out. In the past, I had no “weapons”. I practised “blindly”. I am not so “blind” now. I bring in different perspectives to analyse a case. I am more skilful and more aware of my feelings. I understand clients more. I am generous in giving compliments to my clients. I accept them and can motivate them. I can discern patterns by noting the similarity between and among cases. For example, for some parenting cases, there will be change after one or two interviews. However, in other parenting cases, I may be stuck despite considerable input because the problem is not with parenting. Then, I know what I should do.

Many colleagues seek my advice these days because they consider me a competent worker. I share my analysis of their case and advise them what to do. Often, my advice leads to good results. I think the growth in competence comes with one’s commitment and the will to learn, and the latter is most important. Now, I am able to spot mistakes, reflect on the way I approach a case, and monitor client feedback. If the client fails to keep her promise or appointment, I know I must have made a mistake. This kind of learning may not be available until I have reflected on the experience later.

My reflection on Yvonne’s first story

The first story traced her bumpy journey to competence, attaining a better sense of direction and control. It had a happy ending. Even though she was not a confident person, she managed to rise above adversities. She faced her first adversity as a social work student. Practice teachers left her to ‘swim’ or ‘sink’ on her own although field training was seen to be a test of her competence. Social work education turned out to be mis-education. As a social work teacher, I learn an important lesson from Yvonne’s student experience. Education should be about learning. Yet she experienced it as a test of her worth. She was expected to be a competent social worker even though she was only a student. The story suggests that initial social

work education may in fact make the transition to beginning practice problematic.

Sally, Iris, Venus, and now Yvonne all went through a difficult and often distressing beginning, before they came to terms with their incompetence. They entered beginning practice with these expectations on themselves: grounding their practice on theories, to be effective and in control during client contacts. Soon they discovered the contrary and hence felt threatened. They picked up these expectations from initial social work education that was premised on the technical-rational view of professional practice. Using their professional knowledge and skills, a practitioner should be competent in their professional roles. In field training, students are socialized to adopt this image of professional practice. Later on, they put themselves on a 'competence test' in their first social work job and evaluate their personal worth on that basis.

Beginning practice is a period of survival because beginners need to cope with many things—their clients, their practice, the job demands, their anxiety and sense of inadequacy. Yvonne blamed her clients when she was a beginner in family service. It was a self-preservation reaction. Flora also blamed her clients for rejecting her. Beginners are egoistic one way or the other until they are able to survive the job and come to terms with their incompetence. After that, they embark on an active pursuit for professional learning. Yvonne looked for a therapy model, what family service workers are after in their beginning years. Implicitly, the assumption is that the mastery of a therapy model is the same as the mastery of competence in practice. Again, beginners acquire this notion in their student years.

At the time Yvonne told her first story, she had worked for six years in the family service job. By then, she had attained a positive self-image as a competent social worker in her office. Other social workers consulted her about problems in practice. Her conception of competent practice is this: better grasp of a case, able to recognize patterns, a sense of direction, being confident and skilful at doing what she wanted to do, and better understanding of her clients. Like Venus and Sally, she characterized competent practice in terms of mastery, control, and certainty about what to do and having it done.

* * * * *

Yvonne's first story was a heroic story about a beginner's struggle to renew her self-confidence and finally win her place as a competent social worker. When I interviewed her again three-and-a-half year later, she had moved to another family service centre. The interview was like a reunion of old friends. To connect this interview with the previous one, I opened the conversation by recalling the disservice that field training had done to her.

Re-discovering the 'Lost' Social Work

Second story, 16th January 1998

In retrospect, I might have been overly critical of initial social work education. To be fair, I got something valuable—messages on social work values. Although they appeared abstract and distant, they had sunk their roots in me. These values have influenced my conception of 'good practice' and the direction of my professional development ever since. I was still negative about social work education three years ago because of the bad experience with teachers. I was very frustrated and blamed them for giving me little guidance. Putting it in perspective now, I should blame myself for not asking in the first place. I was brought up a submissive person. I did not dare to question them. Nonetheless, I still regret that they betrayed my trust in them.

I worked in a children's home in the first placement. I had to conduct an intake interview. I felt very nervous. Before the day of the interview, I told the fieldwork teacher my interview plan and asked his opinion. He did not make any comment. I had no choice but to get on with the task. It was a disaster. I was like an eighteen-year-old doing an interview. I asked the client's father whether he was still taking drugs, but this question had nothing to do with the intake screening. I raised many such "disastrous" questions. I did not know other ways to do it. I thought learning was the goal, so I prepared a verbatim record of the interview so that the teacher could tell what I had done wrong. Again, he did not make any comment. However, I was in big trouble when it was time to assess my performance. I cried soon after emerging from the evaluation session. He said, "You have good potential but I couldn't give you a mark for your (poor) performance. In the end, I still give you a

B-grade. You're lucky...another teacher gave me this advice: 'A very low mark would discourage the student.' You are lucky. I give you a 'B' instead of a 'C'." At that time, a 'C' grade was an embarrassment. The relationship was a 'high-power' one. He warned us he was very professional and would not tolerate nonsense questions. Now, I realize that he had taken advantage of me. In the second placement, my partner had a real fight with the supervisor. I thought, "Why can other people stand up for themselves?"

I was able to recover my lost confidence in my first social work job because the boss was good to me. I was like a clean sheet of white paper. I carried out his instructions and produced good work. It would have been a disaster if I had to formulate my own ideas. I think beginners need clear, explicit and concrete instruction. We should not expect every person to be capable of independent thinking. I was raised as a follower. People expect students to work independently in fieldwork placements, but my type of student actually needs concrete guidance and clear instructions.

Re-discovering the foundation of social work

I was taught basic values in the diploma programme. However, at that time, I did not believe we could practise these values. How can we be non-directive if we need to tell a client right from wrong? I was impatient for client disclosure. I knew this mode of practice was good, but I did not experience it this way because I did not follow these basic values and helping principles. Nonetheless, I was aware of this underlying framework. After practising for some time, I began to realize that this should be the way of counselling. Social work education provides us with the foundation. We cannot work with clients if we fail to follow these values and principles. Previously, I considered empathic listening just a skill and treated therapy skills as my "weapons". Now, I realize that empathy is a precondition for achieving good casework process and therapy models do not give us powerful skills.

A trainer once said that the way to do counselling was to walk with the client, sometimes half a step ahead and sometimes behind. Sometimes we give the client a gentle push; other times we pull. We allow space for the client to examine her

problem before taking one small step forward. We can accomplish this with the basic stuff learned in social work education, such as acceptance and listening skills. It is not the technical kind of listening. It involves relating to the client in a genuine way. The client will feel comfortable in the relationship if we respected her/him and allowed sufficient time for her/him to examine different perspectives and the nature of the problem. I think all therapy models have these in common. They constitute the criteria to evaluate my practice. I can master the basic stuff better than in the past. After trying out different practice approaches over the last ten years, I have finally adopted this mode of counselling. In the past, it was a professional to a client. Now, there is increasing emphasis on the worker-client relationship. In yesterday's training session, the trainer made the point that counselling is not "professional-to-client" talk. The client is a person, not a case. It is a "person-to-person" dialogue. I had come across the same message in the diploma programme, but I did not understand it at that time. I thought it was too high-sounding. Nor would I be able to master it. After practicing this therapy model, I find the message true. Seen in this light, the change in practice is not really a big change. I knew these values in the beginning as guides to practice. Increasingly, I have followed this direction. Although I have picked up the language, I have not yet attained this "person-to-person" dialogue. At times, I may revert to "professional-to-client" talk.

There are many therapy models. Some are powerful in motivating a person to change by creating discomfort. There is a parallel with my developmental process tinted by a lot of pain. Do we grow only amidst pain? I understand that change will induce stress and anxiety. Sometimes, change will come with pain. However, why do we focus on negative things if change may come in a more comfortable way? Then, the experience will be satisfying to our clients and us. I find more pleasure in my work after practicing this approach. If a therapy model works by creating a lot of tension and pressure, the client may not be able to cope. Will s/he return for the next appointment? How can we be sure that our diagnosis is right? Why should we take over another person's life? We are not superior to our clients. We have our limitations. That is why I am hesitant to help in a high-powered way. We often over-estimate our assessment. Clients will then give us signals of resistance, hesitation, reservation, self-blame, or by simply not responding.

Three years ago, I strove to become a professional who was able to assess client problems and know what to do. I do not hold this view of professionalism now. I was rather defensive in the previous interview. Otherwise, I would not have talked about so many things so vaguely. Probably, I did not want to reveal my inadequacy. Now, I may not have improved to the point of accepting criticism with ease, but I am at greater ease with my competence. This therapy model has helped me to do better casework. I can help a client to become more relaxed even if she began as defensive, unhappy, or aggrieved. I can help a client to change her/his self-image, feel better, and emerge with a new perspective. I may be half-a-step ahead and pull the client along to explore new and better possibilities. I may slow down to let the client to find the way. I can see my mistakes and what to do. My colleagues frequently ask me for advice. I can offer helpful points in case conferences. The team leader asked me several times to give a workshop presentation. However, I always caution myself not to become too confident. Otherwise, I may see clients in a stereotyped way.

Moving on or else coming to a standstill

I have had the benefit of continuous supervision by professional peers over the past three years in the Brief Therapy team. I need another person to probe me to reflect on my practice. This person needs to be a few steps ahead. Now I need to find some new input. I have been reading, taking courses, reflecting and sharing with colleagues, but these are not systematic training. Many of my contemporaries have already studied for a master degree. However, I am not interested in this. I prefer an extended course concentrating on the study of a counselling model in my practice, with the opportunity to share with other practitioners. I am not able to pursue further study because I am now a mother of two young children. I want to give more time to my family, and that means putting a limit on my investment in work and professional development. Of course, it will be good to have the best of both worlds, but I am now in a "dead-end road". I do not want to stop here. I wish to find something that helps me to improve my performance and find more gratification in my work. Otherwise, I would be repeating the same experience all the time. I would then be on a downward slide. Although it is possible to name and delineate professional development into stages, I do not see the need to conceptualise it this way. No one will say, "I've come

to this point, and it's good enough. I don't need to learn any more." How can we have learnt everything? Some time later, we may have the feeling of coming to a stand still. Now, we may think Solution-focused Therapy is good. A year later, we may turn to other things to complement it or to learn something else. Who can tell? Many trainers have been learning different models at different points in their professional life.

I know some colleagues who, after getting things they wanted, such as promotion and social status, felt stagnant and changed to business. They became a very different person. Probably, it is a mid-life change. I am at the mid-life stage now. After having my second child, I have these thoughts: "How many years before he becomes a grown man? Am I going to stay in this position until I retire? I welcome promotion, better still if it allows me to stay in frontline practice. Our sense of achievement comes from practice. A supervisor's job is terrible. It insulates a person from frontline practice, yet s/he supervises frontline staff. A supervisor relying on her/his frontline experience of ten years ago will not be able to cope. However, it is difficult for supervisors to keep abreast with changes. How can they supervise frontline worker with better training than they have? I am interested in teaching, but I do not have the qualifications. It is better to combine teaching and practice. If social work teachers do not stay in the field, they will not know what they are teaching. Nor will they grow professionally. As a result, they may be teaching outdated practice.

My reflection on Yvonne's second story

The second story began with a re-storying of the first story. In the process, Yvonne made new sense of her experience in her student days and in beginning practice. She still harboured grievances toward her practice teachers. However, she reframed her negative view of social work education because she had re-discovered its value. Its influence had always been present in her professional life, but she had overlooked it in the past. She had arrived at a new understanding of how social work would be helpful to clients. Like Iris, she gave a new interpretation of her past experience and re-examined where she would go from here in her professional life.

In the second half of the story, she reviewed the path that she had been treading from the time she began her social work career. She explored where to go next as a mother of two young children. The past became an integral part of an on-going process toward professional development. Even though her life roles as a woman would limit her investment in professional learning, she would continue to pursue it nonetheless.

Yvonne's second story restores our faith in social work and the worth of social work education. It establishes again the nature of social work as a practical activity. Hence, the proper focus of social work education is on these values. Technical prowess is secondary. However, almost invariably, students and beginners prize the technical—therapy models, techniques and skills. They are concerned about the 'how' more than 'what for' and 'what is good'. Yvonne's 'confession' that the social work values taught in initial social work education had "sunk their roots" in her is at the same time a blessing and a curse. In her view, the foundation of good practice is in these social work values. Sally made more or less the same point. Social work values embody the essence of social work professionalism—what it means to help another person, what constitutes help, the direction of professional development. However, social work values are not immediately teachable to novices. Yvonne was taught these values in her student days but considered them "high sounding", "abstract", and irrelevant to practice.

However, these values re-surfaced and became available later in her professional life. She had re-discovered them in her practice. May be the normative appeal of these values persisted in influencing the way she made sense of her practice experience. Perhaps the meaning of these values was available when she had more life experience. Both Sally and Venus had testified to this point. When Yvonne was a student, acceptance was a myth. How could she accept a client if s/he was not right? On the contrary, in their own lived experience, Sally and Venus understood the fallibility of human beings. They questioned their (professional) authority in imposing a single normative standard for judging health and normality. Thus, they became accepting of their clients. May be social work values could only be discovered, not taught. Yet social work teachers need to teach students these values. Otherwise, students will not be able to discover them some years later in their professional life.

Yvonne's account of how she rediscovered the foundation of social work is telling. Although she did not believe these values as a student, she knew "this mode of practice was good" and "was aware of this underlying framework". However, until she had practised for some years, she could not re-discover these values or their relevance to practice. How did the new awakening that counselling should follow these values and principles come about? She thought it was by experience. A good example was how she came to grips with the meaning of empathy. Experience aside, the external authority of a trainer would be instrumental in validating these values and the mode of practice they support. The values that the trainer advocated were the same as those taught in initial social work education. Furthermore, the trainer not only re-asserted these values, he also demonstrated how these values underpinned a therapy model and the steps and procedures to execute it. "After practising this therapy model, I found the message true." Thus, practice experience had validated these values and the mode of practice that goes with it.

The personal is implicated in Yvonne's choice of this therapy model. She drew a parallel between this model and her developmental experience. She preferred helping other people to change in a comfortable way because, in her life, she had always been at the receiving end of a high-powered relationship. Therefore, she did not want to enact her helping role in a "high-power way". This is another version of how the personal intersects with the professional in social work practice. She was able to empathize with clients at the receiving end of professional power—"clients may not be able to cope". However, she prepared to relinquish professional power. "How can we be sure that our diagnosis is right? We are not superior to our clients. We have our own limitation." She had undergone a philosophical change similar to that of Sally and Venus. Recognizing the limit of professional power not only humbled them, but also called for a different conception of social work professionalism—social workers help by enabling clients, not changing them.

Yvonne had made an about-turn in the journey that she was making in the first story—the quest to become a professional. At that time, she was sensitive about her inadequacy as a social worker. "I did not want to reveal my inadequacy." Hence, she strove for mastery and control in her practice. Her professional biography may explain the general pattern in the developmental trajectory of social workers. In

beginning practice, they are insecure practitioners. They want to prove their competence but are often disappointed. They find themselves losing control to their clients and being led by them. Those who are able to survive their beginning practice and try to do better will look for ways to transform themselves into a confident, competent practitioner who knows what to do and is always in control in their work with clients. Sally's 'power game' metaphor is a vivid expression of the expert notion of professionalism. Thus, following the 'survival' stage of beginning practice, beginners try to overcome their sense of inadequacy by finding ways to reclaim their professional power, and that means learning a way to practice that provides a sense of certainty and control. Invariably, they follow trainers who practise a therapy model that is amenable to clear articulation in practice. In the first story, Yvonne had acquired this "weapon". In spite of the philosophical change in the second story, she remains dependent on a therapy model. "This model has helped me to do better casework." In this regard, Sally and Venus differ from her. They do not rely on a therapy model because, in their view, the 'self' is more important.

Yvonne may out-grow this model at some point in future. In her view, there will always be changes in social work because "there are always new things". In addition, she will pursue professional learning even though her commitment to women's life roles will be a constraint. She saw professional development as a continuous process of moving forward so long as the person perceived the need to learn. The notion of stage progression is not meaningful if it suggests the existence of an ending stage. Continuous professional learning is the prime force behind professional development. Whilst contemplating moving into a supervisory position (the usual career path for social workers) now that she has reached mid-life, she does not welcome it because it "insulates people from frontline practice". Implicitly, she suggests that practice would be the only source of professional learning. Deprived of direct experience in practice, there will be a moratorium on professional learning for frontline supervisors. Social work teachers will face the same risk if they teach in isolation from what is going on in the field.

Chapter 11

Michelle, from Competence to a Philosophy of Social Work Helping

Michelle was older than her contemporaries. Her career path was also different from theirs. She began as an untrained teacher in a secondary school. After teaching for almost four years, she changed to social work as an untrained family service worker. A year and a half later, she joined a counselling service for a short period and then worked in a multi-service agency as a youth worker. She began to study in a part-time diploma programme around this time. After her first social work qualification, she worked in the rehabilitation field, interrupting her career three years later to stay in England for a year. After returning to Hong Kong, she studied full-time for a social work degree before landing the present job as a family service worker.

An Eventful Journey to Attain Competence

First story, 19th May 1994

I began my work life as an untrained teacher in a secondary school. Even though I was young and untrained, I had the ability to understand my students. I spent many after-school hours talking to them. I organized extra-curricular activities during school holidays. I taught them things beyond classroom subjects. I was in fact doing a social worker's job (although school social work was not around at that time). I wanted to pursue a teaching career. I was no less capable than the trained teachers. However, I did not succeed in getting a place in teacher education. Since I would not be able to make teaching a career without training, I decided to explore other career paths. I thought social work would suit me since I had the aptitude to work with people. I applied to the Social Welfare Department for a welfare worker post. I must

have done very well in the interview. I got a family service assignment given to few untrained workers, since the job involved professional work.

Working as an untrained social worker

At that time, the only thing I knew about social work was “helping people to help themselves”, but I did not understand its meaning. Nonetheless, I was able to manage the job well by following established procedures and studying case files. At first, I handled mostly cases needing tangible services. Later on, I took cases needing in-depth counselling. I began to feel inadequate because the problems were so well defined. Around that time, I got a job offer from the supervisor of a hotline counselling service. I had been a volunteer there for some time. She employed me as a counselling assistant to set up a new office. I took the job for its challenge. However, the job incurred all sorts of miscellaneous tasks. I was the only person in the office most of the time—a stark contrast to the crowded office in the first job. I left after a short period and joined another NGO to take up group programmes and counter duties in a children’s centre.

A verdict on initial social work education

Heeding my elder brother’s advice, I began to study in a part-time diploma programme. Having left schools six years ago, I was happy to study again. Every subject interested me. The fieldwork placement was most valuable. The teacher showed me how to do social work properly. Overall, I was happy with the programme although I still wanted more. Then as now, I do not find the relation between training and practice problematic. I do not question whether social work training can help me to carry out a social work job. Practice is a whole-person involvement. Whatever we learn has a bearing on our practice. Although the match between training and practice is not perfect, training is still useful if I can internalise the course input and use it in practice. Social work knowledge is usable in practice, but I lack a strong theoretical base.

Working as a trained worker

After obtaining the social work diploma, I found a new job in a rehabilitation setting. I was able to pick up the job within a short period. I have started many new activities. I was a daredevil person. I would go headlong to pursue worthwhile things. At that time, I craved for learning and attended many in-service training courses. After taking a course on sex education, I initiated a sex education programme for my clients since the public tended to ignore the sexual needs of handicapped people. A year later, I was re-deployed to work in a special school. I adjusted to the new assignment quickly. I got new experiences such as counselling. Unlike when I was an untrained worker in family service, I was able to identify clients' needs and problems as the focus of counselling. I stayed in the job for three years. The experience was rewarding because I had acquired new learning and developed my practice.

Returning to social work education and social work

I left the job to join my husband who had to study in England for a year. Once back to Hong Kong, I reviewed my career plan. After interrupting my social work career, I would not be eligible for promotion. I decided to take a full-time degree programme to raise my professional qualification. The social work curriculum differed little from the one in the diploma programme. It contributed little to practice. However, I was proud to graduate with commendation since I had many roles as a wife-mother at that time. I moved on to a higher-ranking job but the salary was lower than I had had previously. I was a freshman again even though I was older than my peers. I was backtracking on my career path.

A beginner in family service practice

At first, I got an administrative job. I found it boring and left after two months. I then took my present job. I chose family service because I was strong in casework. Nonetheless, it took a considerable effort to learn on the job. I think beginning practice is 'fresh and fragile'. For the first two months, I got a bit of advice from the supervisor. Afterwards, I was mostly on my own to cope with the caseload. Even though I could refer to a procedural map taught in the diploma programme, such as

goals, needs and assessment, it did not help me to handle the cases. I was not sure if I had been working correctly even if the client expressed her/his gratitude for my help. I tried to improvise since many cases were new to me. I drew on my past learning. I consulted my colleagues. My husband (a social worker) even acted as my supervisor. I took in-service training courses. I tried to learn along the way to raise my competence. There were a few successful cases, but there were more that I was not sure how to handle.

Thinking that I was capable and reliable, the supervisor soon gave me additional assignments. Some time later, a new supervisor joined the centre. At that time, I was the most senior of the frontline workers. The staff group was so inexperienced that many colleagues began to consult me. The new supervisor relied on me because she thought I was the most competent worker. She took a laissez-faire approach in dealing with me. It was frustrating since she was not a disciplined, organized manager. Some colleagues made life difficult for her. As a result, collegiality dissipated and this affected people's work. I had little emotional energy left to attend to my cases. I came to a state of stagnation. There was no improvement in my practice. I thought about leaving the agency.

The growth of competence

I entered a post-diploma programme around that time, and that was how I picked up Brief Therapy. Afterwards, I formed a study group with two other colleagues to study this therapy. The agency later turned it into the Brief Therapy team. We need to follow a direction to work with a case. In the past, no one taught me how. When I first adopted Brief Therapy two years ago, I could not pin down what to do. Now, there is a clear direction. I feel surer of what to do with my cases. In a ten-session contract, I know how to construct my interviews with the client—when to talk, listen and respond, and what action to take. I have a clearer idea of the intended outcome in each session. I do more teaching and guide the client to see the way-out. I can find ways to the goal. Clients can tell what I was trying to do and when they are ready to leave. I feel more relaxed because they do not depend on me. Many colleagues ask for my advice these days; I am able to give them useful advice. However, I do not think I have attained full competence. I may get eight on a ten-

point scale. I think there is a process of 'stage development' in my professional life, though I couldn't name the stages. I have stayed in this job for six years, the longest ever, but I still consider myself fresh to the job.

My reflection on Michelle's first story

Michelle was a 'late starter' with an unusual career path. She had managed beginning practice in several practice settings with relative ease. She had studied in two programmes of continuing social work education. The first story covered a winding career path leading to a state of competent practice. She had found a way to learn and mastered the practice of a therapy model. She could steer an interview process toward an intended outcome. She was active in guiding and teaching the client what to do. In short, she was heading toward competent practice in the 'technical-rational' model of professional practice.

Like Venus, her evaluation of initial social work education was quite positive. Both had exposure to social work before receiving professional training. She conceived the connection between professional education and practice from two standpoints. First, the 'self' necessarily has a role in practice if it entails 'whole-person involvement'. The practitioner is not simply using theories to practise. Second, professional learning used in practice is in the form of embodied knowledge. Other family service participants did not hold these views at the time of their first interviews.

It intrigues me that she had trouble in taking up the family service job. In the past, she had managed beginning practice in several practice settings with relative ease, including her first job in a family service setting. Moreover, she was already an experienced social worker. What troubled her was the uncertainty in practice—"not sure if I had been doing correctly". It reflects an implicit 'technical-rational' conception of practice: a practitioner should know whether what s/he does is the correct thing to do.

Michelle's narrative of beginning practice followed roughly the same storyline

as other family service participants. She learned on the job by tapping into what I now see as the usual kind of learning resources available to practitioners—consulting professional peers and taking in-service training courses. Like other family service participants (Sally, Venus, Yvonne) whose stories have been studied thus far, she wanted to improve her practice, or else she would come to a state of stagnation. The way to improve practice was to master the practice of a therapy model. They all sought the security and certainty that fitting their practice into a therapy model could provide. Michelle thought that she had not yet attained “full competence”, and would pursue professional learning to attain that. What is full competence? What afterwards?

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I reached Michelle by phone to arrange our second interview. She asked how the data would be used and in what way it would be helpful. I re-traced the history of this study and then gave her a crude summary of what I had picked up in our first interview. She had followed a career path different from all other participants in this study. It was not a progression from high school to university training, then entry into a social work career. I outlined briefly the changes that I had found in another participant’s (Sally) professional life as a way to focus her attention on the changes since we last met three years ago.

Contemplating Change after Coming to Grips with Practice

Second story, 19th August 1997

I joined a postgraduate diploma programme in 1994. I studied at my own pace. When I was halfway through, my father became seriously ill. I was too distraught to attend classes. Then I had to look after the old and the young in the family. Therefore, I could not think of returning to the course. I do not regret this: an additional qualification did not mean much to me because I am a late starter anyway. It is not worthwhile “selling” my time for the qualification. However, I am still actively learning. Two years ago, I joined a marital therapy group set up by the agency.

Members co-practised some cases and had case discussions. Each member brought in what s/he had read and we discussed the main points. Work had been so busy before so I had not found time to read. The study group was a welcome break from direct practice.

Recently, the agency has tried to develop Brief Therapy. I have joined every training course on this therapy. Although the content was more or less the same, I picked up something new every time. I bear in mind this remark by a trainer: "In every interview, take it as though you are being watched by other people." I may still lose track of myself at times. I need to be aware of the first sign of losing self-control or losing out to my own emotional needs. Another important insight is the way we look at our clients as human beings. We had case presentations in these courses. I deliberately presented a depressing case scenario to justify the need for guidance from the trainer. Other participants were critical about the way I focused on the client's problems and deficiencies. Our view of the client influences our practice in a significant way. Now, I realize that we should look for the client's strength and wait patiently for it to show.

The 'self' in practice

Working on a case is not much of a problem now. It boils down to how we look at our clients. What matters is our attitude and belief about people, not the therapy itself. Some colleagues still regard themselves as superior to their clients. They talk about 'treating cases', but clients are self-determining human beings! We should be on an equal footing with them. A trainer once said that we should value the client's participation in the counselling process. Our part is to give assistance. We cannot provide counselling unless the client uses our help. We should try to get into the client's frame, not cross her/him. This is an emergent perspective of the whole profession. I cannot practise in a directive, forceful way. I have my personal style. In the counsellor's chair, I behave like a mother. I am able to bring in the self more when it is my style. Some social workers do not self-disclose. I disclose in a selective way. Clients will be more receptive if we bring in our own experience. They feel we understand them.

In the past, we followed steps to apply a practice approach. This will not work because there are many difficulties in real-life situations. Having experienced my life-roles as daughter, wife, sister-in-law, and now mother, I look at a case in a vastly different way. Being a mother, I think about my child at work and I understand better the concerns of working mothers. In the past, I thought parents should understand their children. I thought, "I can. Why can't you?" Being a mother now, I realize that I rarely understood the mothers' perspective in the past. Because I could adopt the child's perspective, it did not mean they could. Instead, I should adopt their perspective to understand their difficulty. I need to listen to them sufficiently well so that they will collaborate with me to help their children. A colleague had a similar experience. In the past, she could not empathize with parents who worried about their teenage children. She thought they were 'paranoid'. Recently, her teenage niece did some foolish things. For the first time, she experienced how a parent would feel. Now, she empathizes with parents and speaks their language.

Privileging clients' perspectives

There have been many changes in my approach to practice. I am changing all the time. In the past, I used to look at a case according to some frameworks. Now, I adopt Solution-focused Therapy as a framework to guide my action. The focus is on the client's strength, her/his struggle and pain. It will not work if we fail to appreciate the clients' difficulties and help them to find their strength. Clients often remark: "What you have told me is right. It helps me." I reply that nothing I said would be meaningful if they did not accept it. It works. I always remind myself not to undermine clients by relating to them in a superior way. In fact, they have their resource and strength. These changes in approach originated from the learning derived from training courses. They were intensive courses of long duration. There was immersion in a practice approach and small group sharing among trainees. We would not learn much in half-day courses.

Having first-hand experience is essential. Beginners need to do such things as treatment plans. Otherwise, they will not be able to cope with the demands of practice. It needs sufficient practice experience before a person can conduct assessment in a 'visible' way. We have a way of looking at a case that we are

unconscious of in the assessment process. We simply see it that way. We still draw on some professional stuff in making assessments, but it is not 'used' in a conspicuous manner. We use 'consultation break', 'compliment' and 'tasks. We tap a client's potential to do what s/he has done well. We do not say something carelessly.

Professional input is already strong enough. An overdose may make it worse. In the final analysis, it depends on our clients. We cannot be sure how they will accept our way of looking at their problem. Their way of looking at things is often different from ours. I don't think persuading them to follow our viewpoint will help. I won't say their viewpoint is wrong or mine is right but it is important to understand and accept them, and help them examine their perspectives. They may not be ready to accept a different viewpoint and the outcome may turn out to be bad for them, but we should accept this. I prefer to help my clients feel comfortable in the counselling process.

Intersection between women's life roles and their professional career

Back in 1995 (the time of our last interview), I had both school social work and family casework assignments. Later on, a new worker took over my school social work duties. Since then, I have worked full-time in family service. My colleagues envy me because I do not have to work in a secondary setting and cope with a heavier workload. However, I have a different view. Working in school gave me a broader exposure than does family service alone. I used to be good at managing my work. I am even better now. Life has become 'settled', but I am not the kind of person who prefers a 'settled' life. Lately, I had the opportunity of transfer to a centre closer to home. It would be more convenient for me. However, it would also mean social work duty in a large school. In the end, I gave up the idea, even though I would be able to manage the job and enjoy the exposure. After working for twenty-four years, I need a good rest. Maybe I have reached a life-stage when stability is preferred over change. I need to look after many people and have many responsibilities, so I accept things that I am not pleased with if this allows me more time for my family. I need to balance competing demands of family, work, and my own needs. I need to take care of my health. I should not drive myself too hard. For the time being, life is very stable. I took a vacation recently. In the past, I used to work during holidays. I hold

different values now.

I began to supervise students last year. I modelled the fieldwork teacher who supervised me in my student years. I came across a student who failed to meet my expectations. I began to question whether I was too demanding. I think my role is to help students to become independent social workers. I advised the student to free herself from the confines of book knowledge and learn what the real world is like. However, the student's image of social work was different from mine. In the end, I found the experience frustrating. Students are too sheltered these days. They need to get more exposure in society. They are calculating. Teaching is not worthwhile if the experience is like this. Nonetheless, I still feel the urge to teach. It is something I like. I want to share my view of life. When I was a student, teachers portrayed social work as a professional practice with bright, knowledgeable people trying to help other people. I want to tell them what social work really is. The training institutions need to consider what students need to learn and what they have actually learned. I sensed an interest in teaching five years ago. For financial reasons, I was not able to switch to part-time teaching in the past even though I got a job offer once. Now, I am considering switching to a teaching career. Otherwise, I may be too old to make a change when I want to leave frontline practice. My interest is in fieldwork instruction, not classroom teaching. I would give students all that I know about social work. I would coach them.

My reflection on Michelle's second story

Compared with the first story, the second story presents a very different mood and follows a different storyline. Michelle storied the life stage she was in and the place of the 'self' in practice. She had revised her view of social work. Its essence was not about control, certainty, and effectiveness. In the story, she articulated a new faith and a new philosophy of how social work can be helpful. Like Sally, Venus, and Yvonne, she had made a turn-around from a 'technical-rational' conception of practice to the fundamental nature of social work.

Michelle had reached a stage when women's life roles become more demanding.

Nonetheless, she was still active in studying the therapy model that guided her practice three years ago. However, there was a change of focus. Rather than studying the ‘how’ and ‘what to do’, she was concerned about its philosophical underpinning—who was responsible for change and how change could come about. She had subscribed to the ‘strength perspective’ in social work: the client has the strength to bring about change, with the practitioner performing an enabling role. Instead of seeking to control things, she would remind herself “to be patient to allow the client’s strength to show”.

Yvonne prepared to relinquish the professional power of a social worker. Michelle went one-step further towards the same direction of change, seeing the source of professional power coming from clients. “We cannot provide counselling unless the client uses our help.” On that premise, she had formulated a new philosophy of social work helping. Whether a client will use her depends on the quality of her understanding of the client. Theories alone will not aid understanding because a person’s life does not follow the prescription of a theory. Bringing in her life experience will help her to understand the client better. Like Sally and Venus, she could shift from a theoretical emphasis to a relational one because of her experience in taking up multiple life roles. She became more empathetic and listened to a client’s experience and her/his perception of it.

Sally, Venus, Yvonne, and now Michelle’s second stories all show the same direction of change after attaining a state of competence in practising a therapy model. I suspect their changing life experience is a factor in the discovery of the ‘personal’ in social work practice. Sally and Venus perceived a unity between the ‘personal’ and the ‘professional’ within the ‘self’. Yvonne and Michelle recognized the role of life experience in enhancing their capacity to understand their clients, that is, the intersection of the ‘personal’ and the ‘professional’ in helping others. Their turn to the ‘personal’ is accompanied by philosophical changes in their conception of the professional role vis-à-vis the client role, and a more accepting and empathic orientation to their clients. Beyond the stage of searching for competence is a stage characterized by a deep philosophical change that allows for professional individuation—recognition of the centrality of the ‘self’ in the professional role—and a re-configuration of the professional-to-client relationship into an enabling,

'person-to-person' relationship.

"I am changing all the time." This is how Michelle summed up her professional biography. In storying her changes, she situated her practice in the passage of time and came to see how she had been changing and would continue to change. Previously, she looked upon a therapy model as a framework of action. Now, she perceives it as a way of thinking. I think this reflects a philosophical change in her worldview. The model is not something external anymore. She had transformed it to become *her* framework because "it works". As in Yvonne's account of how she re-discovered the social work values she once overlooked, it took "first-hand experience" for Michelle to construct a personal meaning of what she had learned in training courses. Perhaps there is no shortcut for beginners. They can only learn a personal version of social work in and through practice.

Michelle has arrived at a life stage when she has to make the difficult decision of accommodating her professional career to the growing demand of women's life roles. Like Iris and Yvonne, she is inclined to give priority to her family responsibilities. For women social workers, women's role in the family is still primary.

Chapter 12

Jane, Learning in a Two-way Connection between Knowledge and Practice

Jane was my student in our diploma programme. She graduated in 1986 and was amongst the first cohort of graduates from this programme. She took a social work job for a few years before returning for further training in our part-time degree programme. After obtaining her degree a year ago, she landed the present family service job. It was her second social work job, and she was new to this field of practice.

A Beginner's Account of the 'Knowledge-Practice' Interface

First story, 1st December 1993

I found initial social work education useful. It helped me to build up a foundation from scratch. It offered me a period of self-development and helped me to form my values before entering practice. I got a broad knowledge base and a general understanding of the field of social work. It still influences me now. Had I not been trained, I might have worked the same way. However, I would not have been guided by concepts. My second training in social work was not as useful. I looked for skills and knowledge for frontline practice, but the programme emphasized academic studies of macro issues and had little to do with practice. I did not acquire a solid knowledge base for practice from this programme.

Surviving beginning practice

I worked in a social service centre after graduating from the diploma programme. I expected some sort of direction and a shared ideology to guide my

work, but there was none. People followed routines and traditions to carry out their duties. It was rare for people to discuss theory. My job was about practical things like designing banners, but the diploma programme did not cover this sort of concern. In fact, hiring experienced welfare workers to do my job was a better bargain. Even though they were untrained, they were skilful in achieving programme objectives. In group work, there were more opportunities to use professional knowledge. I could find useful bits and pieces for formulating programme plans. However, I did not know how to search for the right kind of knowledge to guide my work. Much of what was taught did not correspond to the reality. For instance, I was not able to tell which stage a group was in because it was an on-going group with an open membership running for some years.

I went through a period of adjustment in the first two years. I followed programme files to plan programmes. I observed how other workers carried out their assignments. I failed to meet many practical requirements. Maybe the difficulty had to do with my lack of experience. With some working experience now, I would not have any difficulty in picking up the job. It was a period of survival. There was little space for pursuing professional learning. Nor was I particularly conscious about pursuing professional development. Toward the end of the second year, I began to have a better idea of the performance norms of the agency. In the third year, I began to bring in my own ideas and introduce new things into my work. When survival was no longer my concern, I was able to add formal knowledge into group work practice. At the same time, I modified theories to fit the practice reality. For instance, I had reformed the on-going group by adding many new members. In terms of group development, the group was in the formation stage. For the few older members, the group was in the termination stage. Thus, I had a way of seeing how I could help those members who were about to leave the group and those who were new. It was a way of integrating theories with practice through a combination of intuition and insight, modifying the group development model to cope with a practice situation. The ability to adapt theories and apply them in practice marked my entry into the next stage of “development and consolidation”.

A stage of development and consolidation

During this stage, I began to reflect on my experience and identify what I had not done well. Every time I started a new assignment, I went through the same process of adjustment. I would try to improve even if my practice was good. Sometimes, it just occurred to me that some formal knowledge was relevant to the task. There were also moments when I could draw on my insights. It could be something I had known all along but did not have an impact on me until it emerged at that moment. It could be something adapted from the work of my colleagues for use in my own situation. Although I did not see myself as having done something new, my colleagues thought otherwise. Gradually, I became a better practitioner, but I was still less skilful than the experienced welfare workers.

I had changed my group work practice after four years of practice. I no longer followed closely the formal knowledge taught in the diploma programme. I came to the following views. First, we should not believe in theories faithfully. We need to modify a theory in some situations. Second, applying skills was not a conscious process, and the skills used were more than the skills taught in the past. I did not follow a holistic framework. Instead, I followed whatever ideas occurred to me. They gave me a sense, a perspective, or a heuristic to follow. Even as I followed an idea, the complexity and the tactics to take had to be sorted out inside the process. If I had the time to reflect and conceptualise, I might be able to develop a coherent framework.

Changing to a new field of practice

I have been in this new job for a few months. My experience at this point is somewhat like my experience in the first two years. We are required to use theories in our casework practice. There is a professional culture in this agency. On the first day, the supervisor told me why we should guide our practice by theories. In an induction course, participants discussed how to handle a case drawing on the theories covered in social work training, say teaching a mother the use of behavioural modification to solve her parenting problem. To practise with theoretical backup was better than practising in a common-sense way. In case files, there were frequent references to

theories to justify the action taken. I felt pressure to use theories in my practice. Now, I give more thought to using professional knowledge in practice. In my first job, I could not find knowledge useful to me. Nor could I see any value in consulting books. In the present job, the connection between knowledge and practice is stronger. I can find in books what I experience in practice. Therefore, it is easier to get the knowledge out.

A dialectical relationship between theories and practice

I find the experience in this job very fruitful. I am able to draw on professional knowledge to derive hypotheses and formulate perspectives. Of course, I need to test out the knowledge. I do not approach practice pondering which theory to use but rather the concepts for analysing a case. Practice gives me the opportunity to test whether a hypothesis is correct and whether the approach is appropriate. For instance, I have picked up theories about the difficulties that may manifest in parent-adolescent cases. I trace the source of the problem to such difficulties. A different problem in another case is traced to the same source. I conclude that the same source of difficulty has different manifestations. After arriving at an initial analysis of the case, I would try to apply an approach, but would not follow it step by step. Theories only give me a sense of what may be the right approach. I would consider other approaches if I found from the test that it is not the right approach. It is a two-way thinking between knowledge and practice. First, I consider how knowledge can guide my practice. Second, I study the case to look for features that remind me of which practice approach to use. There is transfer between cases since they are often similar. In the beginning, I tended to try out a variety of approaches. If I did not notice any difference, I would stick to one effective in the past. However, if it were not effective, I would look for another approach.

An important way of learning from experience is trial-and-error. If I have more knowledge, I have more guidance on what/how to try. An approach is useful if the trial is successful. It then becomes my practice knowledge. I try something else if the trial were a failure. If I could not find another theory, I would learn from other people's experience even if it were not coherent knowledge to guide action. If I found it useful, it will become my knowledge. There are also ideas from other sources.

They become my practice knowledge if they worked. The knowledge taught in social work education is not yet the kind of knowledge that I can use. I need time to try out the approaches taught and see how to apply them in my own style. In the first two years of practice, I discovered the mismatch between group work theories and practice. I am going to find out whether what I have learned will work in casework practice now. At this point, I am not sure whether I have a good grasp of casework knowledge.

My reflection on Jane's first story

Jane's first story has a prominent focus—the use of professional knowledge in practice. The focus on the use of knowledge in practice probably reflects her concerns at that time. She was still a beginner in the second job. There was the pressure to make her practice theory-based. Her preoccupation with the use of knowledge probably dated back to the time of initial social work education. Among other things, she noted the importance of grounding her practice on concepts even if she would have done the same thing without them. She seemed to be making the point that professional work is intelligent action. Performance is secondary to the rationality behind it. She expected a direct correspondence between a theory and the practice reality. Otherwise, she would not be able to connect her practice to professional knowledge. Such an interpretation of the role of professional knowledge reflects the 'technical-rational' model of professional practice. Jane probably acquired this perspective from initial social work education.

However, Jane had to begin with practice instead of theories in a setting where the tradition of practice made little reference to theories. In this regard, the way she managed beginning practice resembled that of Flora and other family service participants. They learned and reproduced a shared practice, doing what their colleagues did. Flora consulted experienced colleagues before meeting her clients. Yvonne followed instructions from the supervisor to carry out her duties in her first job. Venus referred to the probation report prepared by experienced colleagues to prepare hers. Michelle studied case files and managed to get by in her first social

work job (as an untrained worker in a family service centre). Feeling insecure about their professional competence, beginners are concerned about their performance. By following a tradition of practice, they find the security of knowing what to do. Jane used the performance norms in the workplace to gauge how good she was relative to her colleagues. After she was satisfied that she could meet these norms, she began to bring in her ideas: to “modify theories to fit practice”. It marked a major departure from the ‘direct correspondence’ view of the connection between theories and practice.

In epistemological terms, Jane was creating knowledge when she modified a theory by “a combination of intuition and insight” to cope with a situation to which the theory did not fit properly. It is not clear how “intuition and insight” arise. I think it involves situated cognition motivated by an attempt to solve a pragmatic problem. Once she succeeded in this, she learned that theories are human inventions. She could always modify theories to make them usable in practice. She had found a way to create knowledge from practice experience. “I would be able to develop a coherent framework if I had time to reflect and conceptualise it.” Similarly, Flora tried to grapple with the task of articulating a general framework of practice when she was in her fifth year of practice.

By her fourth year of practice, Jane had changed her orientation toward the relation between knowledge-practice. This new orientation represents a fundamental shift in the ‘epistemology of practice’. When she was a beginner, she approached practice as a technical execution of skills prescribed by theories. By the time she became an experienced practitioner, she was not concerned about which theories or what skills to use. Rather, she attended to the immediate situation. The phenomenon of practice had changed. Thinking and acting in practice was situation-specific. Dreyfus & Dreyfus (1986) describe similar changes in professional practice in their stage model of the development of expertise. As a novice becomes an experienced practitioner, there is a shift from a rule-followed performance to a situation-based performance.

Jane had very different experiences in her second job in family service. Local culture in the workplace prized theory-driven practice. In the previous job, she had already out-grown this view of the relation between theories and practice. However,

to fit into the workplace culture, she began to “give more thoughts to using professional knowledge”. She found the correspondence between a therapy model and the form of practice (counselling) it supports was stronger than in her last job (group work practice). Her account of how she made use of professional knowledge furnishes some interesting observations about the phenomenon of knowledge use in professional practice (see Michael Eraut, 1994, 1985). First, she employed concepts to analyse a case, upon which she formulated her hypotheses and perspectives. Second, she tested the hypotheses in practice and evaluated the applicability of a therapy model, but would not apply a therapy model step by step. She approached the use of theories in terms of action learning, not technical application. Theories were used to serve practice, not to direct it. It would involve judgement to determine what works and why.

The way she mediated practice by professional knowledge provides further insight into the ‘epistemology of practice’. She conceived a bi-directional relationship between knowledge and practice. She might begin from the theory-end to guide her practice. Alternatively, she might begin from the practice-end to look for cues to determine which therapy model to use. It was a ‘trial-and-error process’. She learned from the outcome of it. She was espousing a ‘pragmatic orientation’ toward the phenomenon of knowledge use in practice. She derived action learning in the light of what had worked in her ‘experiment’ of connecting theories with practice. Such action learning became “my practice knowledge” (c.f. Kennedy, 1987; Johnson, 1989; and Clandinin, 1992). Jane did not regress back to the epistemology of the ‘technical-rational’ model of professional practice. In fact, she concluded that the formal knowledge taught in social work education “is not the kind of knowledge I can use”. She needed to transform it in order to render it usable “in my own style”. In this regard, she echoed Sally’s view of “working out” a theory in practice and Michelle’s view that it would require experience to make sense of a theory.

Jane has subscribed to a broad interpretation of knowledge. Apart from formal knowledge, she also drew on her own experiential knowledge (“what works is my knowledge”), her colleagues’ experience, and ideas from other sources. Her ending note summarizes her epistemological standpoint at this time: “I am going to find out whether what I have learned will work in casework practice.” To practitioners, the

ultimate test of knowledge claim lies in its use in practice.

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Jane was still working in the same centre when I phoned her up to fix our second interview. In the first interview, she gave me the impression that she was still grappling with her new job, particularly the use of theories in practice. I was interested to find out how she approached practice after working for almost four years in the family service job.

The Experiential Self in Learning and Practice

Second story, 24th September 1997

After reading my first story, I asked myself "Is that the way I learn?". It does resemble the way I learn although I have never thought about it. In practice, I draw on my knowledge, be it knowledge picked up from training or just common sense. I also learn by observing other people's practice and adapting it to suit me. I would be able to do it even better. Some professional activities are done in the office, like phone contacts. We have case sharing, workshops and training courses. In some courses, the trainer demonstrated their practice, so I could "copy" what s/he did. It is quicker to learn practice by direct observation.

On the use of theories in practice

We are supposed to adopt one practice approach in each case, but I have been eclectic in practice. There are two factors determining the use of theories in practice. Personality is one factor. I would be good at approaches emphasizing listening and understanding, whereas a practice approach requiring frequent use of confrontation would be difficult for me because I am not that kind of personality. We pick up more of those approaches compatible with our personality. The other factor is the client. An approach may be good for some clients but not others. When we become more experienced, it will take less time for us to sense what may suit a client. I refer to

theories in my casework practice more often these days. The linkage between theory and practice is stronger in casework. It is also easier to find theories for casework. In group work, I apply group work knowledge in a piece-meal manner because the linkage between theories and practice is not explicit. This may explain why most of the training courses in the market are on casework practice. I am not sure whether such a discrepancy in the use of theories in practice has to do with our training in social work methods, the theories themselves, or our mastery of these theories. However, there can be transfer of skills from one practice setting to another. For instance, like community workers, school social workers operate in a secondary setting and try to build up the community.

Absence of performance norms in family service

I mentioned “survival” and “development” in the last interview. I am not sure whether it is “survival” or “adjustment”, followed by “development”. My experience varies with settings. In school social work, I spent the first one or two years on “relationship building” and got some ideas about what people looked for. I was then able to introduce further development in the third and fourth year. For family service, I am not sure whether I have succeeded in passing through the “survival” phase. I do not even know what “survival” means. Does it mean closing a case successfully? It is difficult to find out how good my performance is relative to my colleagues’ because I have little access to their practice. My supervisor cannot observe how I practise. Casebooks may furnish some sort of standard for good casework, but what is documented may be too good to be achievable. Anyway, there are too many intervening factors affecting client outcome and client feedback. It is difficult to establish which factor(s), whether it is my intervention, the client’s effort, or environmental factors that contribute to the outcome. In the beginning year, I used to have bad dreams about a difficult interview on the following day. It might be a reflection of my anxiety and worry. It is much less frequent now. I do not worry so much about a difficult interview since I have had some experiences with difficult cases. However, whilst I may be better at coping due to my confidence, it does not mean that I have become more competent since it is difficult to judge my performance. Now that I have become more experienced, I wish to know whether the

outcome is good. I look at outcome from three angles—my perspective, other people's perspective, and casework theories.

The role of experience in informing practice

Beginning practice is easier because we follow this or that approach. Now, it is not about that. I work with different clients in the same way. The difference is with the tempo. First, I listen to the client. Then, I study the nature of the client's difficulty and identify which problem focus is prominent or amenable to change. The next step depends on which stage we are in. For instance, we wish to explore the client's childcare concerns and teach her some parenting skills. However, in the process, we discover that this is not her concern. She would be able to deal with her childcare problems if she could manage her emotion. In that case, we need to shift our focus; it is not desirable to follow one approach closely. It takes trial-and-error to identify the factors and the "dead-end route"; it takes experience to know by "trial-and-error". We should not stick rigidly to the theories in books. Two divorce cases in which the husband had an extramarital affair may look similar. However, when I follow through the case accounts, I would be able to tell which will end up with a divorce. If the client complained to the worker whenever she discovered something about her husband's extramarital affair and yet did not take any action, I know she is not going to divorce her husband. On the other hand, if the client seriously explored what action to take and even began to look for employment, she would end up divorcing her husband. All these are indicators, but many things go together. In some cases, the client may be adamant about preserving the marriage in the beginning but change her mind quite suddenly. Sometimes, it has to do with personality. Some women are more independent and courageous. I learned this from experience.

Professional learning and change

We may come to a new understanding of something we used to know in the past, be it a concept or the way we look at a problem. For instance, my past understanding of empathy is different from what I understand now. It is a step beyond and qualitatively different. That is why it takes experience to know the

concepts and theories taught in social work education. In essence, social work education is similar to living a life or a way of looking at life. What is different is the domain of experience. We have training and later experience. We then build up our understanding. I have just married. How I look at marital relationship is different from what I learned about it in the past. We used to have the notion that there are many societal factors affecting a person, but this is only a notion. We acquire a different understanding of this notion after a person told you about her/his experience and how s/he felt about it. Having access to the lived experience of a phenomenon is very different from reading an account of it. The former has affective meaning to it, but the latter is like picking up some data. However, it does not mean that training has little value. The process would be very slow if we have to learn everything from scratch through direct experience.

Intersection of the 'personal' with the 'professional'

I am more aware of my blind spots now. Who I am as a person affects my practice. Some of my colleagues are very assertive. They can work with those "kiddie girls". At first, I thought I would not be able to manage this kind of client, until I had an experience with one. She behaved in a disrespectful way. I asserted myself and discovered I could do that. In the past, it was not easy for me to confront clients. Now, I realize that there is a need to confront them. It is not the same as changing my self. Rather, it is expanding my spectrum. I found that my confidence and self-acceptance would also affect my practice. Some of my colleagues would instinctively perceive obstacles in a case as a sign of incompetence, and this would affect their mood. A confident worker would attribute the difficulty to objective factors beyond her/his control. I used to be uneasy in working with clients who are hostile or aggressive because I prefer to work in a harmonious way. This predisposition will affect the way I practise, say in working with couples in a conflict relationship. I would try to patch things up at the first sign of conflict. However, if I am comfortable with conflict, I may use it in a productive manner. It took some time before I had this insight. This is the most important piece of learning derived from my practice experience.

That is why some people are better at certain fields or models of practice. We

have learned a number of models in social work education, but there is little guidance on how to select one. Now, I think we need to consider the client variable and the worker variable in selecting a model. Either we adopt a therapy model we feel most comfortable with or turn it into one that we can practise in the most comfortable way. At first, it may be difficult to do something we are not comfortable with. However, it will become easier with experience. There is whole-person involvement in practice. We may copy a way of doing practice, but we would miss its essence. Unfinished business in a person's biographical experience may be a block in practice. If our awareness is low, we may overlook the unfinished business in our life and its hindrance on our practice. Therefore, we should put more emphasis on helping social work students to acquire self-understanding and self-development. We may understand our clients better if we go through a therapeutic process in the client role. I had this experience in a training course on gestalt therapy. As I have experienced what it is like to be a client, I know what to attend to in practice. Another thing I learned is the value of expert modelling. We cannot just talk about practice. We need to experience it and interpret our experience in both the client role and the therapist role.

Reflection on Jane's second story

Jane revisited her story told four years ago. In the second story, I find the relation between knowledge and practice remained a central theme. She re-examined her earlier view and re-confirmed it, and added a new dimension—the intersection of the 'personal' with the 'professional'. She also put greater emphasis on the role of experience in practice.

In the first story, she chronicled how she progressed from the 'survival' stage to the 'development' stage. In the second story, she chronicled her progress in school social work, moving beyond 'survival' and 'adjustment' to 'development'. Meeting the professional norm indicated that she had passed the 'survival' stage. Other family service participants, such as Sally, Yvonne, Venus, and Michelle were concerned about their competence. They saw positive outcomes and their confidence in practice

as indicators of their competence. Jane was different. In her view, the outcome did not necessarily mean that she had done “good casework”, because it was not sure whether it was her intervention that led to a positive client outcome. Since it is impossible for a social worker to isolate and establish the outcome of her/his intervention conclusively, Jane will be forever unsure whether she has passed through the ‘survival’ stage. But why did she want to find out? Simply locating herself in this developmental scheme has no substantial meaning, except for the assurance that she has moved beyond the ‘survival’ stage. I think this concern was a legacy of her beginning experience in her first job. At that time, she was performance-conscious because she was not doing well.

Jane has been on a rising learning curve over the past four years. Initially, she focused on using therapy models in practice. Her preoccupation was to find out whether casework theories would work in practice. She approached practice as a testing ground for casework theories, but the client had no part in this ‘theory-to-practice’ test. Four years later, she would consider both the ‘client’ variable and the ‘practitioner’ (personality) variable in determining “which theory to use”. The people who were the actors in the counselling process entered into this ‘theory-to-practice’ test as the major determinants.

Jane’s approach to practice had also undergone significant changes. It was not about practising a theory, even though the ‘client’ and the ‘practitioner’ variables would determine the selection of theories. She began with practice, bringing in theories in the light of “what occurred in the process”. She had arrived at a similar view after working for four years in the first job. She repeated the same process in the family service job—beginning from the theory-end in the beginning year and gradually moving over to the ‘practice-end’ as she became more experienced. It would take a ‘trial-and-error’ process before she could tell which theory to use in the light of what happened in the process. Thus, beginners are likely to start from the ‘theory-end’ for the security that an external frame of reference provides when they are still in the process of grappling with new practice. Accepting this analysis, even experienced practitioners will go through a learning curve every time they take up a new practice. This conclusion fits Dreyfus’ & Dreyfus’ (1986) ‘novice-to-expert’ model. In a professional landscape with many new lines of service and new therapy

models, how to support practitioners to pursue professional learning is an important issue.

This story underscored the significant role of experience in professional learning. Jane learned by experience how to use theories to serve practice in a responsive way. She could discern patterns after having substantial exposure to marital cases in which the wife is considering a divorce. Jane discovered that “it takes experience to know the concept”. She could derive from new experience new understanding of a concept or a new way of thinking about a situation. In the story, she made an important point about the nature of professional learning—it is experiential. She is right that what people learn in social work education is not professional learning until they have “access to the lived experience of a phenomenon”. Seeing social work education in the metaphor of “living a life or a way of looking at life” is illuminating. Social work is about people’s lived experience and their way in living their lives. This is the subject matter of professional learning. However, they are “only ideas” taught until a person has gone through the lived experience of it and interprets that experience. These ideas will then become the person’s professional learning. Seen in this light, social work knowledge must be experiential. It must be “my working knowledge” (Kennedy, 1987). This leads to another observation that Jane and Michelle had raised—“there is whole-person involvement in practice”, and that means the ‘personal’ will definitely find its expression in practice. Jane discovered “her tendency to avoid confrontation and conflict”. She could uncover her blind spot only by studying her practice.

Chapter 13

Mary, the Path Forward is Continuous Professional Learning

Mary asked me the purpose of this study. I told her that the purpose was to find out how social workers acquire professional learning on the job, as there was the impression that social work education was inadequate in preparing beginners for practice and yet some would become competent over time. She began her story by responding to my concern about the adequacy of social work education.

Attaining the Security of Competence through Professional Learning

First story, 17th May 1994

In the MSW programme, I got a general overview of the field of social work and got some basic knowledge and skills. I was not able to acquire a theoretical base because the coverage was shallow in order to include a variety of therapy models. In fieldwork placements, I was not doing “real counselling” because I was not able to follow any practice approach. I only listened and paraphrased to encourage the client to disclose, but did not know how to put the information together to get a comprehensive view of the client’s problem. In “real counselling”, the worker should be able to come to grips with a client’s problem and have a clear sense of what to achieve in the interview. Nonetheless, I think initial social work education did prepare me for practice because I had the opportunity to practise therapy models in my fieldwork placements. The experience enabled me to apply these models in my job because I knew what worked, what did not, and what modification to make for practice in the local culture.

I picked up a family service job because I liked doing individual counselling. I

had little knowledge about school social work, so I had to learn it on the job. I consulted my supervisor and the out-going worker for the orientation towards school social work. In the beginning year, I learned by taking courses and sharing with colleagues, then applied what I learned in practice. For instance, I had picked up some theories on parenting in my social work training. However, I was not able to apply these theories when a mother brought her child along to seek help. I did not know how to help other than having play therapy sessions with the child, something I had experienced in my fieldwork placement. However, inside the playroom, I did not know what else to do apart making reflective statements until I joined a course and learned some ways to enhance children's self-esteem and improve the mother-child relationship.

I took in-service training courses on my own initiative. It required courage to seek advice from other colleagues because it means exposing my ignorance. However, as beginners, we need to take this step. Other people will not tell us what to do if we do not ask. Now that I have worked for three years, I become more competent in counselling. I am able to learn something new about a client in every interview and know what to explore in the following interview. We should not expect a beginner to be competent because the only way to master a therapy model is to evaluate one's practice experience. Indeed, a person will still find many new things to learn after studying social work for ten years.

Recently, I joined a study group with some colleagues to study Brief Therapy. We had live supervision. We could seek advice from other members when we were stuck in a case. Lately, I came across an "unwed mother" case. The client could not decide whether she would surrender the baby for adoption. I consulted the two colleagues in the study group about what questions to ask the client in the coming interview in order to reach a decision. After listening to the case history, they advised me to ask the client which decision would be most comfortable for her. At that point, I appreciated why this was the thing to do. They then role-played to show me how to handle the coming interview.

For school social work programmes, I referred to other colleagues' work in the design stage. In the implementation phase, I monitored the response of students and

later the feedback from teachers. If the programme did not work, I would modify it next time. For instance, I had delivered a stress management programme to a large audience of students in the school hall. Because of the size of the audience, the display board was too small for everybody to see. Neither could I get real-time feedback from participants. When I offered the same programme next year, I revised the design. I opted for a smaller audience. The trade-off was to replicate the programme several times. In the revised programme, there was time for discussion and feedback from the participants.

I have attended many in-service training courses. Long courses were more useful because there would be in-depth drilling on a therapy model. In a course on Brief Therapy, I learned the way to understand parenting problems. It goes like this: If a mother complained about her child, the child's sibling is likely to be the "exception". The child used to behave well before the birth of her/his younger sibling. Afterwards, s/he became problematic, and the mother punished her/him more often. Soon, there was sibling rivalry. The younger sibling behaved well and got reinforcement from the mother, and that rendered the elder sibling's situation even worse. I have never heard of this "good kid, bad kid" script and the notion of pointing out to the mother the "exception". I could find such examples in my caseload.

A growing sense of mastery

My past practice was a joke. I had no idea what to do other than case assessment, nor was I able to form a comprehensive view of the case. Now, I know what to do and how to do it because I am able to learn on the job. I have a crude picture even before I meet a client. Recently, a colleague referred a "parent-child" case to me. After listening to her case account, I had the hunch that "this is one of the type". I was able to read the situation quickly and know what to do with the mother. I would ask the mother to observe when the parent-child relationship was good and what she did at that time, and when her daughter was willing or not willing to do homework. I would ask her to examine her own attitude and guide her to see the "exception" in being successful with her younger daughter.

Now that I have learnt Brief Therapy, I have a general structure for working with clients. In the first session, I try to establish their complaints in concrete terms and the “exception”. In the following session, I help the client to articulate what benefit s/he would like to get from counselling. I would then work out an action plan with her. Instead of giving the client advice and suggestions—which I did in the past—I help her/him to draw on her/his own ideas. Later on, I would compliment the client whilst reviewing the plan s/he had carried out and the outcome of it. Usually, I meet a client for about ten sessions. At some point in the process, I review the progress with the client. For each interview session, there would be a different topic, but always on her difficulty. By the time the client could tell what action to take in the future to improve the situation, s/he would be ready for termination.

Toward competent practice

I would like to be drilled on this therapy model with colleagues in the study group and make effective use of it. It involves experiential learning. Before an interview, I would mentally rehearse how and when to raise a standard set of questions. I need to learn how to give compliments and praise the client for different things, and what kind of praise will be effective. On one occasion, I praised a client for controlling her emotion. She did not accept this, saying she had not made much effort. I learned from this experience that I should be careful not to praise a client in an exaggerated way, and that we should reduce our dose of compliment for those clients who are rigid, perfectionist, and demanding toward themselves. After accumulating more experience in using this therapy, I would go on to learn other therapies.

In a casework setting, a competent worker is able to come to grips with a client’s problem, know the way for the client to solve it, and handle crises. In school social work, a competent worker knows how to work with teachers and what programmes will be suitable for students. In short, competent workers know what to do and can deliver. I think competence is a product of experiential knowledge. The two colleagues in the Brief Therapy team are competent workers. They have created a general framework for practice and can tell from their experience what to do, and their advice often works. Of course, I still need to judge whether it is the appropriate

thing to do at that point. I am now in my third year of practice. Some colleagues begin to seek my advice. I would be able to pick up a crude idea of what to do after listening to the case account. I may be a competent worker, but not an expert at this point. I regard myself as 70% competent. I am competent with parenting cases, much less with child abuse cases, and have little experience with marital cases. Those colleagues are really experts. They had the experience of working with special cases. I would not know how to handle that kind of cases.

My reflection on Mary's first story

I pick up a beginner's story of how she attained competence and mastery in practice in the first three years of her social work career. Reflecting a 'technical-rational' view of practice instilled by initial social work education, Mary directed her professional learning activities towards the mastery of a therapy model so that she could anchor her thinking and acting in practice on an action schema. Several family service participants told the same story of their search for a therapy model (Sally's 'Holy Grail') in the beginning years. Almost invariably, they started their social work career feeling that they were incompetent because their initial social work education was inadequate in preparing them for practice. Thus, searching for the way to practise became the motivational force to drive their professional learning effort in the early years of their social work careers. This appears to me to be the first leg of the developmental trajectory of the family service participants. Mary was going through it in her first three years of practice. In this connection, I make three observations: first, beginners holding on to a 'technical-rational' view of practice will find themselves incompetent practitioners; second, they approach social work practice (in family service settings) in terms of using or applying therapy models; third, they expect learning these therapy models will enable them, in Mary's words, to have "a comprehensive view" and know "what to achieve".

If beginners invariably start as incompetent practitioners and the attainment of competence is a valued goal of professional development, learning on the job will be an intrinsic part of a beginner's experience. Mary's account of her experience in that

play therapy session is an example of beginners' egoistic concerns in their general orientation to practice. When they come across instances of uncertainty about what to do (and there are many), they perceive this as evidence of their incompetence, and this is anxiety provoking. They are self-absorbed; their energy is focused on how they perform, what they can and cannot do. The client is peripheral in their 'field of vision' during practice. I think this egoistical bias will dilute the attention they should give to the interactional process that is at the core of practice. Furthermore, it will also reduce the mental space they have for meta-cognitive activities such as 'reflection-in-action'.

However, there is a positive side to beginners' awareness of incompetence. It provides the drive to learn in order to improve their performance. Thus far, I have learnt from the participants' stories that beginning practice is a period of intensive learning. There are a number of ways to learn: reading case files / programme files (when Michelle was an untrained family service worker), consulting clients, study groups, reading, case conferences, in-service training courses. However, I think professional learning derived from one's practice experience is the only way to create practice knowledge that the person will find of immediate use. Mary's anecdotal account of how she improved a programme exemplified this mode of experiential learning. It involves a process of reflecting on one's practice experience, noting mistakes and finding alternative ways to improve on them. It is a trial-and-error process to find out what worked and what failed. Other participants had also emphasized the role of experience in professional learning. In Jane's account, ideas became knowable only after she had gone through the experience. In Sally's account, theories became comprehensible and usable after a 'working out' process in practice. Thus, I am inclined to conclude that the site of professional learning for social workers is in practice.

Alan and Iris are one-step removed from practice with clients. They confessed that they would not be able to keep up with the frontline workers they supervised. Venus and Yvonne did not find a supervisory job attractive to them although it was the only career ladder available to frontline workers. I think there is a real issue of what a frontline supervisor's job should be about (if not supervising direct practice) and what professional development this job needs.

In Mary's story, I noted an important difference between beginners and experienced practitioners in their orientation to professional learning. Mary approached the study group as a source of case-based feedback and advice. She looked for authoritative knowledge from trainers, for example, the 'good-child, bad-child' script for understanding parenting problems, and found evidence in her practice experience to validate it. I think beginners tend to position themselves at the receiving end in professional learning activities. Probably, it has to do with their beginner status (young and inexperienced, and was a student not long ago). They learn from authoritative sources and approach learning as if knowledge were depositional. Having covered all the stories (except Vincent's), I also noticed an emergent pattern, in that beginners pursue professional learning for a common goal—the attainment of competent practice. Like other family service participants, Mary's image of competence was about control and certainty ("know what to do and how"). She could accomplish control and certainty by following an action schema to guide knowing and acting in practice. However, when social workers are too certain about what they know and do, as in Mary's case, it risks fitting the client and his/her problem into an action schema that provides a way of knowing and acting—"what to do first, then what follows...". It provides a 'frame' that incorporates problem setting, problem assessment, and problem solution (Schön, 1983). The action schema fits because the practitioner sees the reality through her/his 'lens'. However, seeing one way necessarily implies not seeing in other ways. Mary's description of "a general structure for working with clients" is a telling example. She would know in advance what action to take, when, and how, as though what takes place in a practice world will follow her script.

I am sure Mary has learnt fast. In the beginning year, she did not know what to do although she was already inside the act (recall the play session in the story). Three years later, she would know what to do even before the act. Finding a therapy model and mastering its practice enabled her to practise in the competent manner that many family service participants strove for in their beginning years. I understand why this is the goal of professional learning for beginners. They need the security of this sort of certainty—knowing what/how to do in advance. However, if perfecting the practice of a therapy model is the direction of continuous professional learning, the room for learning from one's practice experience is circumscribed. Mary would try

to perfect the skill of 'giving a compliment' to clients in order to attain 'the other 30% of competence' she fell below—the technical skills for delivering it. She still held on to the 'technical-rational' view of professional practice. She is an 'advanced beginner' at this point. Her practice was governed by a therapy model. She was following the same path that Sally, Venus, Yvonne, and Michelle described in their first stories.

* * * * *

I phoned Mary to set up our second interview. She sounded very positive. We had the interview at her office during lunch hour. I began by stating the purpose of this interview. First, I was interested in finding out what impressed her most after reading the record of our first interview. Would she have changed her view about some of the things now? Second, have there been changes, in terms of professional development and learning, over the past three years? She reacted to the theme of professional development and learning first.

Relinquishing the Security of Competence

Second story, 2nd September 1997

Two years ago, I could afford the time to read and take courses. I cannot afford much time now because I am a mother. However, I still manage to find a little time to read even though work is busy. I need the stimulation. I still take an active part in the Brief Therapy team. By observing and studying each other's practice, we can find the assurance that other people also practise this therapy in the same manner. I get new perspectives in live supervision. We are now ready to consolidate our practice experience and disseminate our practice knowledge to other colleagues. We learn through sharing. I can move forward by responding to other people's feedback. This is what I like—learning, sharing with other people, and more learning. I have followed this path in the past two years.

In the past, I thought I could understand a client's situation better than the client herself/himself, hence my reference to "comprehensive assessment". I no longer

hold this view because it is the client's experience. I am not superior to the client. I collaborate with the client and volunteer my own experience that may give her an alternative view. I join the client in her/his search. I acquired this perspective through immersion. Several factors may have brought about the change. Foremost is the influence of a trainer. In a workshop, a participant asked him what to do if the client did not heed our advice. The trainer replied in a matter-of-fact way: "It's the client's self-determination." He puts himself on an equal footing with his clients. He is a master in the field. Yet, he will follow his clients and support them from behind. If we control our clients and tell them what to do, they will lose their self-respect and self-determination. Reading verbatim accounts of his therapy sessions, I got a feel of the process and the therapist's respect for the client. I have tried to practise in this manner, communicating to the client her/his ability and strength to face the problem. It really worked.

Beyond the fad and fashion of therapies

Perhaps ten years from now, there will be changes in the therapy model that we are using. I think the beliefs underpinning Solution-focused Therapy will remain. People will not return to the "deficit" view of clients. There may be changes in the form of intervention. I sense some changes even now. We pay more attention to the way a client stories her/his situation. The language has changed. We refer to "stories". I have changed the way I practise Solution-focused Therapy. In the past, I used to ask a set of questions. This is not my concern now. Rather, I attend to being with the client and my attitude in relating to her/him. These are more important than asking a standard set of questions. If I do not hold these beliefs, I would not be able to bring out the "flavour" and these questions won't produce the intended effect. If my way of being embodies my respect and faith in the client's ability, simply offering one or two comments on something important to the client will produce the same effect. Therefore, my beliefs and attitudes are even more important than questioning skills. Those great masters respect their clients, attend to the client's strength, communicate their empathy, and lend new perspectives. They have influenced my practice. I talk less in interviews. In the past, I used to be busy looking for questions in response to every client statement.

A therapy model is meaningful to the therapist but not the client. Our clients are not concerned about the kind of questions we raise. If we ask a client what has brought about the change, the reply will likely be: "Who knows?" What matters is the quality of the relationship. I can accept my clients more because I am richer in life experience. For instance, I have greater acceptance for mothers who seek my help because I am also a mother and upset by my daughter at times. Hence, I understand why they are mad with their children. This is the "use of self". A head-nod to communicate my understanding of the client carries a different meaning now that I am more cautious about the quality of my understanding. I put it in a tentative manner whereas beginners enter into practice in "full steam" without ever questioning themselves. As I have become more experienced, I practise from my heart more than from my brain. I am humble and less certain whether I can tell the client: "I understand you." This new awareness is not easy to come by. I learned it from mistakes. I also learned from other people's practice.

The path forward

I would not think about "my competence in practice" if it was not raised last time. Now, it is even harder for me to address this issue. When a colleague looked for my opinion two years ago, I would be uncertain about my opinion. Now, I am certain that the advice I give to the colleague will work for my clients. I still face uncertainty at times, but I am more flexible in dealing with situations because I bring in more perspectives. How we look at a problem matters. It may be "an opportunity". I would not be discouraged easily by a deteriorating situation if I see it as "no big deal". Rather, I would help the client to reflect on how she had coped successfully in the past in even more difficult situations. I picked up this "wisdom" from some trainers. They are flexible people and look at things from a humanistic perspective.

There is bound to be mismatch between social work training and real-life practice because the former has to be basic and broad-based. I accept it as adequate in preparing me for practice, but I still need to learn on the job. I have since seized every training opportunity and applied new learning in my practice. Those great masters do not see their way of practice as the best way. There will still be many things to learn even if a person has become a master. Ever since I left school, I realize that I need to

know more. Learning has always been a central theme in my professional life. What is new is the idea of sharing with professional peers and deriving new learning in the process. As I dwell deeper, I will be able to give more. Reflecting on my “path”, I ask what my life goal is and what contribution I am going to make in my professional career. I have found the path now. It is about making a difference to other people. The counselling I am practicing now is about making a difference. If I were a teacher, I would be able to disseminate my belief to students. If they accept and practise it, the difference will be even more significant than direct practice.

I experienced a time squeeze after becoming a mother. I ask myself whether I have been good to my daughter and my husband. If I need to work beyond the usual hours, I have to make special arrangement. I cannot invest more time on taking in-service training courses, not until my daughter has reached secondary-school age. I want to spend more time with her even if this means forsaking the opportunity to learn. This is the choice to make. However, my husband could afford to come home very late in the evening for the past week. There is a gender difference.

My reflection on Mary's second story

Mary was in the sixth year of her social work career. In the second story, she told how she came to give up the pursuit of competence in practising a therapy model. A practitioner would always be after professional growth in a process of continuous professional learning. She had been learning. What she learned in the past three years was not technical proficiency, but a different conception of practice. As a result, she had renounced professional power (“not superior to the client”), and that necessarily implied giving up what she had attained three years ago—a semblance of being an expert.

It intrigues me that she could have gone through an ideological change of this scale. It amounted to a re-discovery of old social work values and principles (self-determination and respect for the client). Why did she not recognize the significance of the values and principles that she should have learned as a student, until a trainer came along? Was it because of the trainer's authority? If so, she would have accepted

the authority of social work teachers. Was it because of the context in which she re-examined these values and principles? In the light of what I learned from Sally's story (her learning experience in continuing social work education) and Jane's (ideas became better understood in an experiential context), I think it had to be the context.

Another important element in her new conception of practice is the awareness that therapy models are human inventions. They come and go. Why wasn't she aware of this when she studied therapy models in initial social work education? If she examined the origin of these models, she would have noticed that there was a history to each model. I suspect that, in initial social work education, these therapy models are generally taught in an ahistorical manner as 'intervention technologies'. Hence, students will be concerned about whether a therapy works and/or which therapy model works better.

If therapy models come and go as human inventions do, then it is meaningless to search for 'the way' to practise because 'the way' will change with time. Furthermore, it is legitimate for anyone to modify a therapy model or even to invent one. How do we tell which therapy model is 'better' than another? In the absence of 'the way', how do we practise? A question immediate to this study is: What are we after in pursuing professional learning? Previously, Mary tried to learn a therapy model and perfect her skills in it. Does this mean that she will keep on pursuing one therapy model after another? Her answer is 'yes', because she has come to view continuous professional learning as an integral part of professional life in social work. However, there is a subtle but significant distinction about what she is going to learn from studying therapy models. In the past, she was after technical competence, perfecting her skills in the execution of a therapy model (e.g. the skill in 'giving compliments' to clients). In other words, she treated a therapy model as a tool. Professional learning was about how to use this tool skilfully. This time around, a therapy model is a system of ideas. Practising a therapy model is not about the execution of procedures and a set of prescribed activities. A practitioner is not enacting prescribed action. This marks another important element of her new conception of practice—social work is not a technical practice. It is about giving expression to the philosophical underpinning that gives rise to a particular way of helping. Thus, at issue is not the execution of acts in a skilful manner, but how the

practitioner interprets and embodies its philosophical underpinning as a part of her/his belief system. Mary brought out this point nicely in the following reflective statement: “If I do not hold these beliefs, I would not be able to bring out the flavour.” Seen in this light, social work is an embodied practice. It is a practitioner’s way of relating to the world. Thus, practice involves self-expression, “from my heart more than from my brain”. Mary’s story lends support to the integration between the ‘personal’ and the ‘professional’ found in the stories of other family service participants (Sally, Venus, Michelle, Jane, and Yvonne). Like them, she has greater acceptance of clients because she has more life experience. She realized that understanding another person is always difficult. She will be learning, but what she is after is no longer certainty and security in practice but rather flexibility in dealing with situations.

Chapter 14

Vincent, a Five-year Journey Back to the Beginning

Vincent was relatively new to the profession compared with the other family service participants. He graduated two years ago and began his social work career in the present agency as a family service/school social worker. He was interested in working in a school setting. I explained my interest in learning how social workers learned and developed in their practice, acknowledging that initial social work education was largely irrelevant to actual practice. He clarified whether the purpose was to find out how beginning social workers could skilfully use abstract textbook knowledge in practice in a natural manner. He seemed to have certain preconceptions. I reframed the question to a narrower focus. I asked him to describe his experience in making the transition into a social work job, and “translating textbook knowledge into practice might well be an aspect in making the transition”.

(Re)Visioning Social Work in Two Contrasting Metaphors

First story, 1st May 1994

When I was a student, I considered the taught content elementary and yet basic to follow. I made conscious use of assessment and intervention skills in my fieldwork placements. However, two months into this job, I came to realize that it should not be about practising skills on clients. Rather, I should give them the help they expect to get from me. Therefore, the proper focus was to listen to the client and understand the problem s/he presented, before using my professional knowledge to find out what to do in response to the problem and her/his needs. One thing I learned from social work training is the importance of knowing and responding to clients' needs. Social work is about finding and responding to

people's needs in the best possible way. Seen in this light, social work training was adequate to prepare me to practise. All the elements are there. The problem is that people tend to over-simplify them or take them for granted. Every social worker has to start with something basic and formalized to enable her/him to practise in an intentional manner. If there is nothing basic, practice will become haphazard. It takes an incremental progression before a person can acquire a personal framework for practice.

My understanding of social work was rather shallow in my student days. I had this idea that I would get good results if I followed the prescription in books. I put too much emphasis on using skills and knowledge in an artistic way to meet clients' needs. Now, I know the important thing is not the use of skills but the mobilization of a client's potential to meet her/his needs. "Boxing" is a good metaphor to depict the change. At first, I thought each move must be beautiful. Now, it is "street fight" to knock out the opponent first. Any method, including common-sense methods, will do so long as it works. Apart from professional skills, there should be an emphasis on social work philosophy and personal philosophy because social work involves the use of self.

A shift in orientation

People consider initial social work education inadequate because they are concerned about skills and expect to follow prescriptions in textbooks as though they are practice manuals. However, it is impossible to cover all the situations in textbooks. That is why they find it inadequate, the more so the more cases they come across in practice. I think the proper aim is to develop our thinking and perspective toward social work. We would be able to develop the skills or acquire them from other sources so long as we understand the underlying meaning.

When I was a student, I approached social work like a painter approaching her/his painting with a clear image of what it will look like. Giving service to a client is part of my study. The client is likened to an "essay topic". I create the structure and then fit the client in. However, in a paid social work job, whether I can

meet a client's needs is what matters, not whether I can use skills. I had a vague sense of this awakening in the last year of study. It became prominent a few months into the job. It dawned on me, as I was preparing a case assessment, I was only trying to satisfy my need to demonstrate the use of theories and skills, but nothing to do with the client's need. Now, I approach social work like a tailor cutting pieces of clothes out to fit a client's needs.

There is a distinction between applying professional knowledge and responding to clients' needs. In the former, the concern is to demonstrate a theory or a skill even if it does not respond to a client's problem. When we play soccer, there is no point in playing artistically if there is a quicker way to score a goal. Similarly, it is meaningless to approach practice in terms of skill. We help people through "the use of self", not "the use of skills", though it so happens that the self also possesses professional skills. Social work training lays down the groundwork so that students can move from a "skill orientation" to a "relationship orientation" in making the transition to beginning practice. The skills I use in practice now are not derived from books. They are not systematic. For instance, I learn from outreaching social workers that young people like to boast and tease each other. As a school social work worker, I would use these kinds of "starters" to initiate contact with students. The principle is to speak their language and tune into their way of thinking. We can generate skills if we understand this principle.

A beginner's experience

The present job is ideal. Maybe there was a transition period in the first two months. I was not worried about meeting the job demands. Rather, it was about meeting my own demands on myself. I was uptight and rather self-conscious of my identity as a social worker. I spoke in a polite, "educated" manner to students, but this only reinforced the social distance. I reflected on this: Why would people see me as a social worker because of the way I talk to them? It is my need to impress other people that I am a social worker, not their needs. Since then, I have changed my style. I talked in a casual way in their language. After I gave up my preoccupation with professional image, relationship building with clients became

faster and better. At first, I did not know many things, such as community resources, procedures, and micro-skills. I could not learn these things in my fieldwork placements. Like learning how to swim, the theory (of swimming) applies to everybody, but we acquire a unique experience each time. There will be change as we accumulate new experience through practice. That is how we acquire these micro-skills through practice. The transition period is like a long grinding process. In the beginning, we produce something we consider good. In fact, there are rough edges and we need help from other people to polish our work.

Professional learning in the work place

Professional learning is continuous. We learn not simply because we are beginners. We learn everyday through reflective observation of how other colleagues present their practice and by listening to their problems. I have always learned by consulting peers when I was stuck. People would then flock together to discuss. Sometimes, we also role-played to explore new ways to work. I am trying to pick up the solid body of knowledge they own. We cannot pursue self-development without insight and stimulation from other people. When we become more experienced, we may revise something unconsciously by ourselves, which in fact is derived from stimulation from peers. We become smarter through learning from mistakes. I learn when I am stuck or failed to accomplish what I wanted to do, or what used to work in the past no longer worked this time. I would then look for some new ideas or modify the old ways, or seek help from peers afterwards. Next time I come across a similar situation, I would try out the modifications. I seldom read up books to learn theories. Unlike many beginners, I have not been active in taking in-service training courses. I prefer getting more experience in working with people than taking training courses because my job is to deal with people. In addition, we learn by trying things out in practice. Whether the skills will work or not can only be determined in practice. Rather than spending my time digesting another person's knowledge, it is more profitable to spend my time digesting my own experience in practice.

Conception of good practice

We are required to choose a practice approach to apply in every case. However, I don't think there is a consensus in the office. The general direction may be similar, like which practice approach to adopt, but different people will have their own unique interpretations. Even though the ultimate goal is the same, how each person understands a specific situation will be different. I think more important is the need of the client. I would know how to help if I know the client's need. Some colleagues in the centre are expert practitioners. They know what to do in practice and can get it done. They are able to offer a case analysis, suggest the method of work, and carry it out. After working for two years, I am still not a competent worker. However, I have been improving all the time. Previously, it took more time to gather client data because I collected it in a loose manner. Now, I take less time to formulate a crude assessment because I am more selective and know which area to pursue. There has not been any change in the perception of social work I formed during my student days, as about the worth of human beings and the qualities to be cherished in being human. In fact, my practice experience in the last two years has reinforced this.

My reflection on Vincent's first story

It is a story of a young social worker beginning his social work career with his new found ideology of what social work is about—responding to clients needs by whatever means work. In his student days, he conceived social work as a performance in demonstrating the use of professional knowledge and skills in helping. What intrigues me is the ideological turn in his conception of practice.

Vincent conceived the nature of social work in dichotomous terms, moving from one end of the ideological spectrum to the other. In his case, professional development is not a linear progression, but movement in a dialectical process. Reading his story reminded me of similar 'turn-around' in orientation in the stories of other participants—from winning the 'power game' to relinquishing professional

power, from prizing technical competence to prizing the quality of understanding, from certainty (knowing what to do and how) to uncertainty (following the client), from active intervention to enabling. Have I discovered a pattern? It seems that social workers' developmental trajectories have to thread through ideological tensions. At the core of professional development are changes in the person's ideology, apart from changes in her/his performance in the professional role.

I understand why Vincent approached social work practice as 'artful performance' (his 'boxing' metaphor) in using professional knowledge and skills when he was a student. This is understandable because the social work curriculum privileges professional knowledge. Social work teachers tend to assess students on that basis. Therefore, the display of professional knowledge and skills has survival value to a social work student. Clients become the object they 'operate' on to display their mastery of knowledge and skills. Vincent conformed to the reward system of social work education.

Most beginners will be too busy learning the job, coping with their client, or nursing their feeling of inadequacy, to be able to find the mental space to review their orientation toward practice. However, Vincent was concerned about the nature of practice. Whilst giving up the primacy of professional knowledge, which is a core value of social work professionalism, he elevated another core value—responding to clients' needs. He perceived them as antithetical to each other. I have two questions. What led him to revise his orientation to practice after beginning his social work career? Why did he perceive a knowledge-based practice as incompatible to practice that is responsive to the needs of his clients? In social work education, professional knowledge is taught so that students will be able to respond to the needs of their clients.

On the first question, I speculate that his beginning experience in practice must have played an instrumental role in prompting him to re-think his orientation. Probably, other concerns became prominent in real-life practice. Displaying professional knowledge would not be a value in the practice world. Instead, he would be concerned about whether he was able to help a client. But how could he help? He turned to another core value in social work—responding to clients' needs.

The focus was on the client and the needs s/he expressed—hence the importance of listening and understanding. However, it was not simply his pragmatic concern that led to the change in his orientation. There was an ethical dimension to it. He was aware that “practising skills on clients” was not right.

There are more narrative data to account for his view that knowledge-based practice is not compatible with needs-responsive practice. In the ‘painter’ metaphor, the client was an object (e.g. canvas to paint on) upon which he performed his professional knowledge and skills. There is centring on the self and how he used professional knowledge and skills. However, in the ‘tailor’ metaphor, he had to centre on the client to determine what/how to fit the client. As a painter will be self-absorbed in what s/he is doing, social work in the ‘painter’ metaphor will not be responsive to client’s needs. In the stories of other participants, I often find a strong egoistic bias in beginning practice. Vincent must have reflected on his experience in practice, and realized that it was not right to leave the client out.

There is another element in his new ideological position. He considered the ‘how’ unproblematic so long as he understood that the meaning of social work was “responding to people’s needs in the best possible way”. He embraced a ‘pragmatic epistemology’—the ‘how’ was what works best according to his experience. It intrigues me that he did not privilege professional knowledge and skills in this regard. They are no better than the kind of cultural resources that laypersons employ to help another person. Does it mean that common-sense practice is as good as professional practice if it works, and any person can do social work?

This was indeed his view. Both the ‘boxing’ and ‘soccer’ metaphors conveyed his opinion that whilst using professional knowledge and skills might add an aesthetic dimension, there would be no guarantee that the professional way was superior. He could improvise a way and polish it by experience. In this respect, he is different from other family service participants. The latter considered the ‘how’ problematic and using theories or mastering a therapy model the way to improve practice. He did not consider knowing a client’s need problematic because he conceived it as a matter of interpretation. So long as he understood the meaning of social work, he would know a client’s need. It sounds familiar to me. Michelle and

others had made the point that it entailed 'whole-person involvement' in practice.

Whilst the means is unproblematic, a practitioner needs to determine the ends according to their "thinking and perspectives toward social work". Seen in this light, social work practice is ideological rather than technical. It is not a professional practice because there is no privileged status given to a body of professional knowledge and skills. Social work education socializes students to shape their thinking and perspective toward social work. However, it is not about training for competent performance because practitioners have to learn the knowledge to act intelligently through a continuous process of 'reflection-on-experience' and collaborative learning with professional peers.

Vincent renounced social work professionalism because any such indulgence would mean centring on the self, and that means serving his interest instead of the client's interest. Seen in this light, a single theme underpins this story—decentring in order to be 'client-centred.' His story stands out for its contrast to those of other family service participants in several aspects: the way they approached beginning practice, their conception of social work, their notion of professionalism, and their need for security that accompanied their need to exercise control. He was one year junior to Mary. They worked in the same office. However, their stories are so different from each other.

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I had interviewed Michelle and Mary before I phoned Vincent. I learned from them that he was still working in the centre. He offered to see me after work and we met on campus. I began by stating the purpose of the interview: first, to review what was covered in the last interview; second, his experience and change over the past three years since we last met.

Rediscovering the 'Professional' in Social Work

Second story, 23rd September 1997

Having revisited my first story, I notice that my process is the reverse of other people's. I began my social work career thinking that we would be able to help if we were committed to meeting our clients' needs. Now, I realize it is not so simple. I learn this lesson from a case. The client was a mother to three young children. The eldest daughter was a nuisance to her when she felt exasperated in tending to the two younger twins. She was a reflective person. She understood the nature of her difficulty. In counselling sessions, we had explored the ways to cope. However, life remained difficult back home. It is not as simple as trying my best. I need the skills to help her to perform her maternal role successfully. Not all problems are susceptible to solutions. With the growth of experience, we would find many things not amenable to change. For example, some parents may fail because of their unique circumstances. How can a mother afford to use the "I" message patiently with the burden of housework and childcare on her back? If these 'I-messages' really work, they should have worked a long time ago!

The 'personal' cannot be separated from the 'professional'

Maybe it is the change in my personality that leads to the change in the way I work, or maybe it is the other way round. I used to be egocentric because I was the only child of the family. I expected my parents to cater to my every wish and want. I carried this over into beginning practice. I tended to look at a client's problem and its solution from my standpoint only. However, in the last two years, particularly after my marriage, I came to terms with the need to strike a balance amongst different demands and expectations. I accepted the need to consider my wife's perspective. I became more conscious of my role as a son and a husband. With the change in my personal life, the way I looked at students changed also. In the past, I used to be on the side of students against restrictive school practices. Now, I counsel students to be more accommodating to make life easier for all the parties concerned. I think personal change matters to social workers because their work

involves “the use of self”. The “professional self” cannot be separated from the “personal self”. Over 70% of the way I handle problems in my personal life is found in the way I handle students’ problems. Our perspective is an expression of our self.

The need for a framework of practice

When I first handled parenting cases, I did not follow any specific framework. First, I would form a picture and identify some possible ways to deal with a client’s problem. Then, I would assess the client’s ability and motivate her to take appropriate action. I did it in an intuitive way. Now, I find this way of practice ineffective. We would be more confident if we have a concrete theory, a framework, or a model to fit the problem. Recently, I picked up Brief Therapy from my colleagues, a solid framework that guides me how to use “scaling questions”, “exception”, and ways to sustain the conversation. I think only those people with a solid groundwork built on those frameworks and a thorough grasp of their practice can afford to do away with theories or frameworks. It is unfair to the client if we rely on our intuition because there is no guarantee. Moreover, the problems of my cases are getting too complex for me to readily pinpoint the focus. Therefore, I have increasingly followed Brief Therapy over the past year, and the outcome of my practice is better.

A return to the beginning

People often evolve some sort of specialization with the passage of time. However, there was a person who began his social work career seeing no boundary or restriction. He simply worked in his way. At first, he was effective. Some time later, he realized that a social worker would need a systematic framework to back up his practice and render it effective. He traced back to look for a systematic framework. This is my process of development—a return to where I should have started in the beginning. In the past, I did not trust what was in books. For instance, I thought there were no abnormal people in this world. I would be able to help if I accepted and understood them. Later, I came across a male client suffering from manic depression. I discovered that I could not be helpful if I did not have the

knowledge of manic depression and how it would complicate the client's problem. We need book knowledge before we can accept a client in a concrete way and give family caregivers some educated opinions.

Failure experiences made him more realistic

Unlike other beginners, I was secure in the beginning years. I thought only people with a weak personality would feel insecure. I preferred meeting people to learning methods because I thought knowing human beings was more fundamental. I did not take courses, read books and the like. After sharing with my colleagues and with more failure experiences, I realized that many things defied our natural ability to handle. If I practise in an ignorant way, I am fooling other people and making a fool of myself. Now, I see the need to spend more time on reading, consulting peers, and in-service training courses.

I am now in my fifth year of practice. In the past, when I took a new case, my first thought was about the kind of change I ought to bring about in the client. I am not so secure with my ideas these days. I consider more things rather than going along with my intuitive ideas. I worry more whenever I pick up a new case. The first interview is most worrisome because I am not sure if I can find the entry point or have a good grasp of the case afterwards. In the past, I was secure because I did not have a base. It is like people climbing up stairs. They hold on to the handrail because they know it is unsafe, but I am different! I shoot up to the second floor. Since it is easy, I do not see a problem in getting up to the third or fourth floor, only to discover later that it is also easy to fall back to where I started. Thence, I become more cautious on my way back to the second floor. I am going through this process now.

I have had many failures. A school case had a strong impact on me. The client would be better off had I not been his worker. He came from a problem family and harboured a lot of anger. His school performance was the worst in his class, but his IQ was over 130. I advised him to meet the school's requirement. Otherwise, he would not be able to survive this stage of education even though he was very bright.

I acted just like his parents. Understandably, I could not establish rapport with him. In the end, he could not get a place to continue his study in the school. He did not want to continue his schooling in order to inflict a powerful revenge on his parents. If I could help him to understand his emotional problem, he would have experienced my care for him even if he could not continue his study. I regretted this deeply afterwards.

I discussed this case with other colleagues. At first, I accepted the conclusion that it was difficult for people to have insight. I refused to admit my mistake until I had the opportunity of sharing this case with my former teacher. He asked me pointedly whether I thought it was my problem or the student's problem. In the latter case, he would advise me to study social work again. He once told us that we could claim every case as successful. There would be no unsuccessful cases because we could blame our clients. I knew he was right. I had indeed been explaining away my mistake. I began to ask myself how many clients had fallen victim to my incompetence. I thought, "What is the point for me to stay in social work? If I quit now, I will spare clients my incompetence!" I reviewed every case in a somewhat systematic way and look for some theoretical backup to what I had done. I looked into the social work literature to see whether I had used the right method. After this review process, I noticed some changes in my casework practice.

Integration of the 'human' with the 'theoretical'

There is a passage through stages in our professional life, though the changes may not be so drastic in my case. I went through three periods. In the first period, I despised theories. Later on, I discovered the need to base my practice on theories. Recently, I began to attend to mundane things in people's life, e.g. things like cooking, grocery shopping, and the like in a housewife's life. Besides the theoretically based criteria of well-being, we need to attend to every aspect of a client's life before we can understand and help her/him in a comprehensive way. There is a 'social' dimension in 'social work'. Probably, I am entering into the third period now. There is a true integration of the theoretical and the human. I am no longer worried about the difficulties in motivating my clients to change. I begin

with the thought that this client, a mother and an accomplished business executive in her mid thirties, has gone through a drastic change and become a helpless, inexperienced parent. What is her feeling like? How does she make sense of her current situation? I feel secure sharing her feeling of helplessness and then use theories to help her to build herself up in a systematic way.

One way or the other, we go through a process of connecting our professional knowledge and our personal experience. We would not be able to integrate the two in three years of social work training. Sometimes, the self prevails over our practice. Then we need to use more skills. However, to put too much emphasize on skills will make us very insecure. We will find a better and more complete picture when we are able to bring in the “human element”. I think we have to go through this process. It is like following a recipe to prepare dessert. We know the ingredients but we are not sure about the perfect combination. We will not succeed the first time we try. We have to go through a stage of trying things out until at some point we can find a right combination that satisfies most people. It becomes the recipe that you are going to use for a long time, but not forever because our judgement will change with age or maturity. We need to change the recipe later. It has to be this way—always changing.

Professional growth comes with the ability to reflect and review our experience and come to terms with our failure. If a social worker fails to evaluate and reflect on her/his practice, and refuses to admit failure and accept change, it becomes even more problematic the longer s/he stays in the job because it is difficult to supervise what a social worker does. We need to find ways to help social workers reflect on and evaluate themselves. Existing ways, even live supervision, fail to hit the problem.

The foundation of social work

There would be no need for social work education if a person could get by practising in an idiosyncratic way. In the past, I thought theories and models were expressions of ideological domination, turning what used to be layman into a

systematic text. Now, I realize that there is intelligence in these theories and models. If we rely on ourselves to organize our scattered experiences, we may not be able to organize the fine details. We need a theory base to bracket off personal bias and subjectivity. That is why I advise social work students to read more. Admittedly, having social work skills is not good enough; we also need the “heart”. However, having skills is still better than having the “heart” without the skills. My gravest problem in the last three years was my self-indulgent ideas about human nature, relationships, and the good society. I had the “heart” but not the skills. Whilst I could be very good at times, I could also be very bad.

In the past, I thought “empathy” was a skill to communicate our concern and understanding to a client. However, there will be no relationship in the absence of genuine feeling for the client. Now, I regard empathy as the most essential element in social work practice. It is a state of being, something spiritual. A person may have experienced all sorts of suffering and difficulties in different times, different roles, and different situations. We are doing social work if we have a genuine concern for the person’s experience, if we can feel with her/his suffering and difficulties, and if we have the commitment to face all these. I think clients are smart and sensitive. They will know. The core of our practice, from the level of micro-skills to the level of macro-practice, is empathy. The foundation of social work lies here. In the past, we did not appreciate the Rogerian concept of empathy. People used to say, “Isn’t it easy to practice counselling this way, just giving brief verbal response like um...yes...?” However, this is in fact difficult because we are all constrained by our personality and experience. We cannot be empathic with all our clients even if we want to. It is not difficult to understand a client, but to be able to feel with the client is qualitatively different. Our training is not up to this yet. We need to acquire it from experience.

Not only do we need to feel with our clients, we should convey a sense of hope to them. It is formidable to be able to empathize with another person’s pain and yet to be able to transform it to hope at the same time. We need to be capable of influencing our clients. But how? At the core is the quality of the person. There is no born-social worker. It needs training because there are blind spots in every

person. We need to find people with the right stuff to become a trained social worker.

Not every person is suitable for frontline practice. Some social workers are not strong on theory but are effective in helping their clients. On the other hand, there are social workers powerful in giving theories and supervision to other workers, but they are helpless practitioners. I find it absurd to put a person in a supervisory position not because s/he is strong in frontline work, yet ask that person to assess a practitioner's work.

My reflection on Vincent's second story

History has repeated itself. The second story followed the same storyline of his first story. Three years later, Vincent reversed his ideological positions to where he started as a student—social work practice is a professional practice. He discovered (re-discovered?) that “there is intelligence in these theories and therapy models”. The second story seems to verify the observation I made about the ‘path’ of his professional development in the first story. It was a movement in a field of tension, from one polar end of an ideological spectrum to the other end. Perhaps, social work has always involved such tension because of the dualism in social work values and beliefs. In this story, it is the ‘human’ versus the ‘theoretical’.

Vincent reclaimed the place of professional knowledge and skills in social work practice. However, he still held his previous view that social work was about responding to client needs, but there was one important revision—he should not practise unguided by theories and models. Thus, he reversed his anti-intellectual stance of three years ago. Why did he give up this view? How did he re-discover the necessity to practise in a theory-informed way?

Jane was right about the centrality of experience in the professional growth of social workers. Vincent had gained more experience both in his personal life and in his professional life. Unlike his first story, Vincent talked a lot about his experience

as a social worker, a son, and a husband. It came across to me as a long confession of how he had failed his clients because of his simplistic thinking. There was an air of repentance, learning an important lesson at the expense of his clients. New experiences prompted him to re-think his orientation toward practice. Every social worker will experience failure. It depends on how the person looks at it. Yvonne used to blame her clients in beginning practice. Vincent resolved to learn to become better. His second story reminds me of Iris's. In both stories, the narrators re-visited past experience and sorted out what they were going to do in the process of storying.

Vincent entered social work with a youthful optimism that he could help others if he tried his best to respond to their needs. It dissipated with the passage of time as he experienced more and more failures. It took him longer than other family service participants to acknowledge his incompetence in beginning practice. After coming to terms with his incompetence, he followed the same path that others had taken, looking for the security of authoritative knowledge to make sense of a client's problem. Indeed, he privileged this kind of knowledge over intuition and common sense, which he now considered an ignorant way of practice. Compared to other family service participants, his 'path' had an additional stage in the beginning year—a period of naive confidence. Whilst other participants set out to study theories and therapy models in the beginning year, Vincent began his search for security under the shelter of theories and therapy models some years later.

The 'path' metaphor is a substantial concept in his professional life. He identified three periods in his path. The organizing theme was his conception of the role of theories in practice. There was directionality—a linear progression in a process of uncovering what it takes to practise and the role of theories in it. At the time he was a student, practice was governed by the 'theoretical'. After working for two months, he discarded the 'theoretical' and approached social work solely in terms of the 'human'—his commitment to respond to the needs of clients in the best possible way. He storied this part of his social work career in the first interview. In the third period, he restored the 'theoretical' in his practice after experiencing failures in helping his clients. Now, the 'theoretical' exists side by side with the 'human'. The 'theoretical' can bracket off the excess of the 'human'—personal bias

and subjectivity.

Parallel to the process of moving in and out of the ‘theoretical’, the ‘human’ side of practice had also gone through a major revision. In the beginning, the ‘human’ side of his practice was ideological. He believed in it but had not experienced it. Now, the ‘human’ reflects what he has learned from his lived experience in his personal life and professional life. His failures in practice (the mother who was burdened by child care and the student who avenged his parents by failing his school career) showed him not only the need for the ‘theoretical’ but also a deeper appreciation of what it means to be human. He is moving toward the integration of the ‘theoretical’ and the ‘human’.

Movement between the two dichotomous positions—the ‘theoretical’ and the ‘human’—reflects another dualism in social work. This provides further evidence for my earlier observation that professional development is a dialectical process. At this point, Vincent gives the ‘human’ a more prominent position in his personal philosophy of social work because he recognized that empathy, understanding, and hope constitute the foundation of social work. Therefore, the role of experience is important in ‘polishing’ the personal quality of a social worker. The ‘recipe’ metaphor conveys the value he placed on experience as a moving force in his social work career. Vincent’s story makes the same point that the stories of other participants (Sally, Iris, Yvonne and Mary) have made, that is, professional learning is sustaining their drive to become a better social worker, wherein they find a sense of purpose and meaning in living a professional life. It keeps them from a downward slide. I think this is what professionalism is about.

PART III

LEARNING FROM STORIES

THEMATIC DISCUSSIONS

Chapter 15

The Final Research Act

Telling what is Learned from the Stories

We shall not create from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time
(The four quartets: Little Gidding, V.T.S. Eliot)

I owe this opening epigram to Professor Parsloe. She handed me this quote in my study break in Bristol in 1999. We had a discussion of the observations I made of these stories, one of which was the ‘return to basic’—back to the philosophical core that give social work its essential character. She thought this epigram would capture nicely the journey that some of the participants had gone through in searching for the new, which led them to re-discover the old—and know the old for the first time.

I started this research study with the assumption that every social worker would go through a process of learning and change to become proficient because initial social work education did not provide an adequate base for practice. I went on to explore what the phenomenon was like. I listened to social workers’ narratives of how they learned, what they learned, and the changes they went through in their professional life. Now, I return to where I started, and see the starting point in a different light.

First, beginners learn on the job, irrespective of whether they considered initial social work education adequate or not. Beyond beginning practice, some social workers (at least the participants in this study) will continue to learn, and some will continue pursuing learning projects of their own accord. Second, what constitutes an adequate base for beginning practice is a far more complex issue than I had previously assumed. Whilst initial social work education is a common launching

point for a social work career (except for a few who join social work as untrained workers), students vary in what they acquire from it. Once they start, they need to learn on the job one way or the other. However, initial social work education does influence a beginner's perception of the need for professional learning. Third, and this is central to this study, professional learning and change intertwines with a person's life experience and life changes. This will be even more prominent among women social workers because of the primacy of women's family roles. Furthermore, life experience is an important resource for practice. Thus, professional learning is not confined to a person's professional life. The line between the 'professional' and the 'personal' is thin. There is more interchange between the two than I previously thought.

The 'journey' to explore the phenomenon led me to talk to a group of social workers and listen to oral accounts of their professional biography, recollections of events and experiences in their professional life. In the story chapters in Part II of the report, I retold their stories about learning and change in their professional life. In the reflective discussion at the end of these stories, I examined their individual experience, the developmental trajectory, changes in their conception of social work and their orientation to practice, the meaning of these changes to them, and how they looked at themselves as a social worker.

I am going to bring together what I learned from the process of re-telling, reading, and reflecting on these stories in a series of thematic chapters that make up Part III. I need to qualify what I mean when I say "I learned this-and-that...in this research study". Writing these thematic chapters is a crucial part of writing research. It establishes researching as a knowledge production activity. Researchers will present their findings and conclusions, and discuss the implications of the research findings, in the end part of a research report. This is what their readers will expect. However, I am going to deviate from this convention. What I am going to present in these thematic chapters is indeed "what I learned"—ideas, opinions, observations, and 'my knowledge' that I would not have known or thought about had I not carried out this study. First, I wish to explain how I come to know "what I learned" and why I am deviating from the convention in the way I approach and present the 'findings' of this research study.

From telling stories to learning from these stories

I have closely monitored my presence as the author in composing the stories. I want to minimize any unconscious bias or distortion that I may bring into these stories by way of what I select to tell, the choice of words, the manner of re-narrativizing, and the emplotment of a story. I trod a precarious line in accepting my authorial presence in (re)telling another person's story on the one hand and minimizing personal bias and distortions on the other. Reflexivity helped in what was a delicate task. Now that I have retold their stories, the task on hand is to tell what I have learned. This task is no less delicate, and even daunting.

I adopted the 'story' metaphor in presenting the interview data to give coherence to the events and experiences that the research participants recollected in our interviews. The study is about how social workers learned and changed in a social work career. How each person constructed the meanings of events and experiences in the past is central to this study. When Sally described the practice of social work as winning a 'power game' in the first interview, she was conveying not only a metaphor but also an important accomplishment in her quest for competence at practice. She did not say, "This is my accomplishment". However, reading it in the context of the interview at that time, I had no doubt that she did perceive it as an important accomplishment. I inferred the meaning to her in the immediate context of the on-going conversation in the interview.

The interview was 'captured' in tapes and later as narrative data in textual form. When I wrote her first story based on the interview record, I kept the 'power game' metaphor in the story to mark a fruitful outcome of her long years of continuous professional learning in her quest for competence in practice. It became a part of a developmental trajectory. She had the idea of what good practice should be like at the time of beginning her social work career but could not live up to it until she came upon a therapy model, learned it, and became proficient with it, and gradually transformed it into her personal model of practice. The 'power game' metaphor became a part of a 'professional development story', and was given a second layer of meaning in that context. After the second interview with Sally,

winning a 'power game' was a thing in the present. While it was still a part of an extended 'professional development story', it no longer stood for an important accomplishment. Instead, it became a symbol of misguided practice that she has outgrown. Thus, the same piece of narrative data was given a third-layer meaning in the context of the larger story. It reflected a conception of practice whose ideological underpinning lies in the 'expert' notion of social work professionalism—as opposed to the 'enabling' notion.

As I moved from the first-layer to the second- and third-layer meanings, I was not inferring the meaning of winning a 'power game' to Sally. I was making my own meaning of it in the larger context of this study. The meaning evolved with her unfolding professional biography as well as my unfolding perspective of the patterned changes among other research participants. Winning a 'power game' becomes a metaphor for the final attainment of a competent practice in the 'technical-rational' view of professional practice. It will be a goal many beginning social workers strive for and may attain after years of practice and continuous professional development. Of those who reached this final attainment of a competent practice, some will outgrow it in favour of a 'client-centred' ideology of helping that they once learned in initial social work education and which still constitutes the philosophical core of social work as a helping profession. In a crude way, I have outlined here 'what I learned' from the stories, which I am going to elaborate in subsequent thematic chapters. My point is to explicate how I moved from telling stories to learning from these stories. Telling stories is an interpretive act, culminating in the emplotment of a story. Narrative data which emerged in the interview context, assumed their meanings in the context of my re-telling of the research participant's story. They furnished part of the evidence to warrant something to be learned from reading, reflecting, and analyzing the stories.

I am the author of 'what I learned' from the stories. Narrative data do not tell 'what I learned'. Another person will give a different re-telling of the research participants' stories. S/he will also learn something from these stories, and what s/he learned is likely to be different from what I learned. In a research study, the researcher is responsible for what is to be learnt and what is learnt in the end. This is a re-statement of "knowing cannot be separated from the knower". However, I

wish to draw a distinction between ‘knowing’ and ‘learning’. Knowing is a private act, what we do to live a life. When I write ‘what I knew’ here, I am the only author of what I knew. I may discover later that what I knew is erroneous, and then I know something new. When I write ‘what I learned’ here, it is a public act. I am telling an audience what is worthy of knowing, not only to me but also to them. Furthermore, what is worthy of knowing is evaluated on the basis of a shared discourse, agreed upon norms for judging whether ‘what I learned’ is warranted, and a shared interest in evaluating the worthiness of what is learned.

I characterize the telling of what I learned from these stories as ‘thematic chapters’. I stay away from any claim of findings for its positivist undertone and an implied arrogance in asserting the truth of what is learned. Nor do I wish to characterize the thematic chapters as my ‘conclusions’. Like the research participants, I may offer a different re-telling of ‘what I learned’ from these stories at another time. The possibility of a different re-telling is always there if knowing and learning are products of interpretation and meaning-making, and the researcher self is always implicated in the act of knowing and learning. The research self does change. I prefer to tell ‘what I learned’ in the manner of a series of reflective discussions with my readers, even though there cannot be any dialogues to move the discussion along. I am going to tell my readers how ‘what I learned’ is warranted in the light of the meaning I made of the narrative data collected in the interviews, and in what way these learnings are important to me, and maybe to them as well.

I studied physical science in my undergraduate years. I used to migrate between the probabilistic world of quantum mechanics and the rule-governed world of Newtonian mechanics. I always admired how the probabilistic world could give a semblance of order and stability in our physical world as humans experienced it. I studied Heisenberg’s Uncertainty Principle and learned that what I see is not what is. Researching the social world is an act of knowing the uncertain and the probabilistic and, at the end, telling the members of a knowledge community what is learnt. However, I go around this impossible task by disclaiming what I learned is final, yet holding myself responsible for convincing the readers that what I learned is warranted in the context of this research study. What then is the value of learning something that is at best provisional? As I see it (and believe in it), the value of

researching lies in its contribution of a new discourse resource to a knowledge community. If this research study yields new perspectives and new ideas in our talk about social work education, about the nature of social work knowledge, about the relation between knowledge and practice, about the professional lives of social workers, and about their place in the social work community, I will be rewarded for the time and effort spent on this research study.

On positioning a research text: About authors and readers

Writing research is a public act; the problematics are of a different kind compared to writing stories. It is a performance in presenting how the researcher initiated an inquiry, conducted the inquiry in a disciplined and methodologically appropriate manner, derived knowledge from her/his data, such that s/he is able to tell other people the significance of the knowledge found. Who are these 'other people'? Authors and readers mutually constitute each other. I am the author of what I learned from this research study, but who are my readers? I need to identify the intended readership of this research study and the readers' interest in knowing what I learned. In so doing, I would have made explicit to my readers who I am as the author.

I wish to share what I learned from this study with four groups of readers: the academic community which evaluates the scholarship of a Ph.D. dissertation; the research participants; social work teachers in Hong Kong and their students; and lastly the local practice community of social workers. The intended readership is heterogeneous. In other words, I need to cater for a variety of interests. Probably, I need to speak in several voices—as an academic social worker to senior members of the academic community, as a colleague to other social work teachers in Hong Kong, as a teacher to social work students (theirs and mine), and as an academic social worker who wants to learn from frontline social workers.

Writing a Ph.D. dissertation is not the same as writing a research report. I learned from Professor Parsloe that the Bristol University would encourage qualitative research, but that did not mean forsaking methodological rigor. As I was preparing the draft for the thematic chapters, she reminded me of the contextual

differences in social work education between the U.K. and Hong Kong—about the routes for people to enter a social work career, learner characteristics, and the institutional arrangement for the provision of social work education and field-based learning. I should bear in mind these contextual differences whenever I speak to the readers in Hong Kong. An exciting and original idea derived from these stories may turn out to be a received idea in the U.K. context. However, studying the U.K. scene will entangle me in a study of comparative social work education. I opted for something much easier—to confine the discussion to the Hong Kong scene. I am going to provide the necessary contextual information for my readers in the U.K. Perhaps they may find something new from seeing an existing idea in a different context. Professor Parsloe gave me another piece of advice: Speak with clarity in the text about who I am and to whom I speak.

When I wrote the stories, I was writing with the research participants in my heart. I cherish the authenticity in each story, and the privilege they gave me to listen to their stories. At some point in the research process, I began to cherish the idea of researching as a collaborative inquiry between the researcher and the research participants. I wanted a dialogue with them as I wrote their stories and what I learned from them. I tried to do this in writing Flora's stories. However, I soon realized that I might have put too great a demand on her to act as a partner in a collaborative inquiry. She had a busy job. All frontline social workers (in Hong Kong) do, and had too little time to turn the inquiry into a collaborative project. I could only manage to send each participant my interview records and discussed the first-generation reflection paper with some.

After the dissertation is out, I would like to listen to the participants' reflections after reading their own and others' stories. I would like to listen to their comments on what I learned from their stories. Maybe it is a good idea for social workers to study their professional lives within a cooperative learning community. It will generate useful learning for the social work community. In the last two years, I used some of the stories as teaching materials in a course for practising social workers. They realized for the first time that their professional life is a social work text, and there is much to learn in reading this text. Other social work students, especially those going through their initial social work education, will find the stories worth

reading. I am certain that there are many important lessons for students to learn from these stories.

I launched this study from my vantage point as a social work teacher. For this reason, much of what I learned from this study will be relevant to other social work teachers in Hong Kong. I initiated this study on the assumption that social work teachers had done a poor job in preparing students for beginning practice. I had this impression when I was a social work student and later a practitioner. I still had this impression after I became a social work teacher. Some perennial issues spotted in my student days are still relevant today—the theories taught are too abstract, students do not have good grasp of these theories, they are unable to apply theories in practice, they are not prepared for beginning practice, what is taught is unrelated to their work. Social work education has been slow in responding to these issues. Save for the inclusion of more therapy models, the social work curriculum—at least the one in the programme I am teaching these days—is similar to the one in my student days. Thus, I looked beyond social work education to find how social workers learned and developed their competence after entering their social work career. Nonetheless, I am not about to write off social work education as irrelevant. It will be relevant in launching a social work career if we know how social workers resolve those perennial issues on the job and become increasingly proficient over time. I hope that social work teachers may then be able to introduce some timely changes in the curriculum. For my part, I have tried a few ideas in the last two or three years, such as helping students to ‘work theories out’ and examining the theory-practice connection in their fieldwork placements.

After going through the second interviews, I began to see this research study as a tribute to those frontline social workers who make social work an important part in their life, and yet have at best a weak voice, if not a muted one, in the professional discourse. Imagine that they teach a course on social work theories and practice. What will they teach? Will they teach the same way social work teachers do? Will they demand that students use a therapy model in their fieldwork placement? How will they teach social work values? They may find it necessary to re-write the curriculum and teach it in a different way. I am sure Yvonne would help my students see professionalism in a different light. I am sure Sally would help

them to examine their quality as a person and how their life experience has made them who they are. I am sure Flora would sensitize my students to the influence of those negative stereotypes and category labels on the way they relate to people on the margin, while Venus would help them to examine the professional discourse in a critical light. The stories are not simply individual stories. There is a collective voice of social workers who come to know social work through their experience with clients. They are the privileged many, yet their collective voice is weak. I hope they will find their collective story after reading this research. The social workers in these stories restore their clients to the centre-stage of social work. I hope this research report will restore practitioners to their rightful place in authoring the practice that they are doing.

Chapter 16

(Re)Constructing Social Work

Searching for the New, Re-discovering the Old

This is the first of three chapters that put together a picture of some patterns of professional change after a person enters a social work career. At the same time, I am fully aware of the diversity. The stories have attested to that. For this reason, discerning patterns in these stories is a precarious task. I shall approach this in three ways. First, I will describe the patterns of change. Second, I will construct a composite story to show how these changes come about. Third, I will highlight some crucial factors that account for the diversities in these patterns. This chapter deals with the patterns of change.

I had to supply a title for this study in my third year of work. By then, I had completed two sets of interviews with the family service participants. One prominent feature in these stories impressed me—how they learned and revised their ideas about social work practice. Thus, I came up with the following provisional title for the study: *Constructing social work: Stories of the developing social worker*. The provisional title still stands many years later.

I picked up an image of beginning social workers entering an unfamiliar ‘professional landscape’, adapting Clinadinin, Connelly & et al’s (1995) metaphor for this study. What they learned in initial social work education gave them little help in navigating their practice. They had to learn on the job—by consulting professional peers, following the traditions of practice, reading, in-service training, and learning from practice experience. However, they came to know social work more and better with the passage of time.

Narratives of change in the passage of time

As I visited and re-visited these stories in the research process, the passage of time was marked not only by new experiences, but also revisions in the meaning of experiences. Changes in the person's professional life intertwined with changes in her/his personal life. In the first interview, participants constructed their past from the time they began their social work career. In the second interview, they revisited and reconstructed this story and brought it up to date. They talked about how they had changed over time as a social worker. In both stories, the passage of time was implied in the (re)construction of a person's past, and much more so in the second interview. If I had stopped at the first interview, I would have had a 'cross-sectional account' of professional learning and change told by a group of social workers. Changes would still be situated in the passage of time, but they were told in a one-off manner. The first stories alone would still be interesting for a study of how social workers learned and changed in their professional life, but it would lose much because it was not the end of the story.

In the second interview, the participants talked about changes since the first interview. In a period of two or more years, there had been substantial changes in their professional as well as in their personal lives. Few had talked about their personal life in the first interview. By contrast, this was a prominent feature in the second stories. They talked of changes in their jobs, in their conception of social work, in their orientation to practice, in their style of practice, in their evaluation of initial social work education, and in their pursuit of professional learning. They also re-visited the past told in the first interview, and offered a re-interpretation of it. Yvonne re-told the role of initial social work education. Sally, Michelle, and Mary cast a critical look on the achievement of competence that gave their first story an optimistic look. They no longer aimed at competence after re-visioning the nature of social work and the ethics of professional helping. Despite the seeming inconsistency and contradiction in the re-interpretation of their past, there was narrative unity in the way they constructed their life and their identity as a social worker.

Sally made her second story a continuation of her first. "What I have

accomplished in the past two years is to integrate the stuff in the first stage with the stuff in subsequent stages, thence arriving at something new.” She storied how she arrived at the artistry of social work, how she practised and improved her practice, how she looked at theories and their ‘use’ in practice, and how she turned life experience into an asset in practice. Perhaps we should understand this second story, not so much as a contradiction of the first but as re-vision and re-construction. As Ricouer (1991) puts it, “Our life...appears to us as the field of a constructive activity, borrowed from narrative understanding, by which we attempt to discover and not simply to impose from outside the narrative identity which constitutes us.” (p. 32)

Participants did not simply fulfil their role as respondents. Each was constructing his/her identity as a social worker. Through autobiographical reflection, in the process of (re)telling their past and present, “a new relationship is being created between the past and present... designed to give greater form to one’s previous—and present—experience” (Freeman, 1993, p. 32). As they re-told their professional life in the second story, they situated it in the broader context of life-span development. Alan and Venus were acutely aware of the imminence of making a mid-life change before it was too late. Yvonne had reached a stage when family commitments became a serious constraint on professional learning. Michelle experienced the difficulty in fulfilling what she saw as women’s life-roles and pursuing an active professional career at the same time. She was thinking about getting a part-time teaching job. This study became their study also. I studied professional learning and change in their professional lives. They studied their life as a social worker in the larger context of their life narrative.

Storying our professional life is a rare event. We are usually too busy to find the time to reflect on our experience. A cloak of ordinariness often masks the journal of our professional life, until someone comes along and asks us to tell the story of our life as a social worker. We search our autobiographical memory for something meaningful about our life, “gaze back upon the past and charts that ‘upward’ trajectory whereby one has managed, despite the trials and travails that have come one’s way, to prevail, to come into being” (Freeman, 1993, p. 90). Sally, Iris, and Yvonne storied a trajectory of obstacles and final accomplishment driven by their urge to learn to become better. They told heroic stories about overcoming

difficulties so as to move forward.

As the participants storied changes in their professional lives, a conception of professional development was implicated. They reshaped anew their past and, by implication, themselves as social workers by interpreting and re-interpreting the meaning of their past in its present presence. Narrating their past at two points in time, they conveyed a process of development through continuous professional learning. As Freeman (1993) points out, we get a sense of moving forward in time only by looking backward. As we gaze back, meaning in the 'past presence' changes as we interpret it anew. As the participants constructed and later re-constructed their past, in the process of storying their experience as social workers, they not only fashioned their identities as social workers, they also re-fashioned the 'professional landscape'.

I become hopeful after studying their stories. They added something to the professional landscape, hence constructing social work. Seen in this light, social work is a dynamic field because its practitioners are constantly re-shaping its 'professional landscape'. As they learn and reflect on their lived experience as a social worker, they will re-vision and re-create the essence of social work. Even if initial social work education is 'inadequate', my students will learn in the world of practice and some of them, like the participants in this study, will (re)construct social work. I wrote a 'greeting message' to social work students entering the final year of their training in 1999, telling them of my optimism:

This is your final year... Some people may have already reached a decision to take up a social work career. However, there will always be people who are not at all satisfied with the programme and/or have doubt about pursuing a social work career...it is still too early to reach a verdict. There are many versions of social work. The version taught in social work education is not the same as the many versions of social work embodied in practice out there. Social work is not a fixed entity. It has life. It is a life constructed by social workers... You will emerge from the second placement with a clearer view of social work. However, don't take it as what social work really is. I have been talking to a group of social workers over the past five or six years. Each articulates a version of social work that has been in the process of evolving. In the final analysis, our version of social work reflects who we are, and who we are as a social worker is always evolving if social work is an important part of our life.

You are about to join force with other social workers to define the character as well as the worth of social work in the next century. Remember this then: To listen and

understand another person's life is an art; to develop this art in your practice is science—if by science we mean a process of inquiry to reveal something in a better light. Social work education does not stop and should not stop at the end of a pre-service programme. I have come to see social work education more as a process of life-long learning. Whatever you may have picked up in this programme only gives you a platform for developing the art and science of the 'personal' in social work practice. You are going to perceive the need to learn once you begin your social work career. I have a few past students who keep in touch me about their social work experience. With their capacity to question the social work that they are doing, they hold the promise of finding knowledge in their practice that is authentic and indigenous to social work. In the process, they will help to re-create and re-generate social work. Speaking as a veteran who has long left the battlefield, I have the same faith in each of you. (Personal communication, 3/09/1999)

Having expressed my optimism, I need to tell my readers how it is grounded on what I learned from these stories now that I have read, retold, and reflected on them. How do I tell what this collective drama of professional learning and change is like? I will leave the stories themselves to speak for the participants since I have retained the narrative and stuck close to the transcript in composing them. Narrativizing the participants' experience is the alternative to describing the phenomenon in a non-reductionist language. As readers go through these stories one at a time, each will have her/his own interpretation of what the stories reveal. I have offered my reflective discussion in conceptual language at the end of each story. Again, I could leave it at that, but this would mean leaving a job half-done. After telling and analysing a number of stories, the more I feel the need to make some overall sense of them by finding patterns, looking for themes, drawing out contrasts, explaining the differences, and uncovering some sort of rationality underlying the phenomenon.

I have read a considerable amount of literature on the professional development of teachers (Goodson, 1992; Bullough, Jr., Knowles, & Crow, 1991), counsellors and therapists (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992), and social workers (Pearson, 1975). The literature shows a divide between narrativising that captures the phenomenon of professional development at the level of individual experience, and theorizing that provides a reductionist understanding of the phenomenon. There are teacher stories, counsellor stories, therapist stories on the one hand, and research-based conceptualisation of the phenomenon on the other. The latter is what I am doing now in trying to crystallize what can be learned from reading these stories. I am fully aware of the risk of distortion in fitting a phenomenon into reductionist language and emphasize this now before setting out to tell what I have

learned.

I have identified four dimensions of change that many participants went through with the passage of time. I am going to give a descriptive account of these changes. The table below gives an overview of the dimensions of change and their manifestations in what I call 'sub-processes'. Following this, I will sketch the four dimensions of change and the sub-processes in each dimension that, taken together, constitute a practitioner's professional worldview.

Table I

Professional learning and change: Dimensions and sub-processes

Dimensions of change	Sub-processes
<p>A. Orientation toward the nature of social work practice</p>	<p>From uncertainty to certainty through control, and then to openness to uncertainty again.</p> <p>From an abstract conception of the normative base of social work to the lived experience of social work as praxis.</p> <p>From a focus on acquiring and using professional power to a focus enabling clients to assume control of their lives.</p>
<p>B. Place of the self in social work practice</p>	<p>From centring on self (self-absorption) to centring on client, first as object and later as subject, and later to include the self (reflexivity).</p> <p>From the separation of the 'professional' from the 'personal' to the intersection of the two, and finally to the integration of the 'personal' with the 'professional'.</p>
<p>C. Orientation toward the nature of social work knowledge</p>	<p>Restricting oneself to professional knowledge to including all forms of knowledge.</p> <p>From a limited view of 'using knowledge' in an instrumental, direct-correspondence sense to an interpretive/constructionist view of 'using knowledge', and then to an embodied way of 'using knowledge'.</p> <p>From a linear view of knowing and acting to a dialectical view.</p>
<p>D. Ideology of social work professionalism</p>	<p>From an 'expert notion' of professionalism to an 'enabling notion' of professionalism.</p> <p>From seeing clients as objects of practice to seeing them as the expert on their own lives.</p>

A. A shift in the orientation towards the nature of social work practice

There were changes in the family service participants' orientation toward social work practice. At the time they began their social work careers, they were plagued by a sense of 'impoverished practice'. They were either not sure what to do or found their way of practice ineffective because, as they saw it, of the inadequacy of initial social work education in preparing them for practice. Had it been adequate, they would be able to practise competently, that is, with a sense of certainty and control. They adopted the 'technical-rational' view of professional practice. Practitioners use professional knowledge to understand and act to achieve the desired outcome; hence, practice is a test of their effectiveness. They gave a number of reasons for failing the 'effectiveness test'—did not learn the theories well, unable to use theories in practice, lacked confidence in practice, or unmotivated clients. They started to learn new ways to improve their practice: consulting professional peers, studying case files, reading, and taking in-service training. Invariably, they looked for authoritative knowledge from in-service training courses to give them a way, be it a framework for practice or a therapy model, to know what to do to achieve the desired outcome.

They shopped around for longer training courses that focused on the practice of a specific therapy. Somehow, they ended up adopting rather similar approaches that gave them the sense of certainty and control—a way to 'see' a case, identify the 'entry point', and determine the action to take. The approach adopted functioned as a 'lens' for seeing clients' reality and a procedural guide for action. Mary's 'good kid, bad kid' script is an example of the 'lens' metaphor. The general structure for working with clients is an example of a procedural guide for action. After gradually perfecting their skills in using it, they became confident and secure in what they did with clients. They would know what the problem was even before client contacts. Thus, beginning from a state of uncertainty and insecurity in practice, they acquired a sense of certainty some years later. The first set of interviews revealed changes in this direction.

However, in the second interview, there were drastic changes in their orientation to social work and their approach to practice. They reversed the version of competent practice that they had spent much time and effort to acquire. They no longer adhered to a particular framework or a therapy model to guide practice. Instead, they centred on the client and tried to understand the client's perspective in viewing her/his situation/problems. This was a fundamental shift from their previous orientation toward practice—the skilful application of a therapy or a framework to assess a client's problem and bring about desired changes. In this orientation social work is a 'technical practice', and the client is the object of professional action.

The new version is a paradigmatic opposite to the 'technical-rational' view of practice. The client is the subject and her/his subjectivity is to be known and understood by the practitioner. The worker helps by listening for understanding, then joins the client in exploring her/his view of the problem and the resources and strengths on which s/he can draw on to deal with it. Sally offered a clear articulation of social work as an 'enabling practice'. So did Yvonne and Mary. They shared a philosophical core—a set of values, attitudes, and beliefs about clients, change, and the nature of social work. It was not so much a shift in practice as a shift in ideology. They should have come across these ideas—client self-determination, empathy, genuineness, respect, acceptance, prizing clients' strength, beginning from where the client is—as the foundation of social work taught in initial social work education. However, they were not able to comprehend their meanings then. Perhaps, the meanings can only be grasped through a practitioner's embodied experience of practice. After some time, and increasingly competent in practice, they were able to re-discover these ideas as though knowing them for the first time.

Hence, they gained a more fundamental sense of certainty and security than when they relied on 'a way of seeing a case' and some powerful 'weapons' to use in practice. They acknowledged that change could not be imposed on a client. It had to be initiated and owned by the client. The seed of client change resided in the human potential to see things in a new light and to pursue new options. Sally's second story revealed her faith in the client's strength to direct her/his life. She would be able to

help by doing the 'ordinary' thing—listening and understanding—in a sensitive way, not by her professional power to achieve what she considered desirable for the client. Other participants, Yvonne, Michelle and Mary, also relinquished their professional power because they had changed their conception of practice. They believed that clients were their own 'experts'. Social workers could help by joining and accompanying them in their quest to change for the better.

In this 'enabling practice', the practitioner begins from practice—her/his understanding of what the client revealed. S/he does not begin with theories or therapy models. Sally would "bracket out" theories in order to listen carefully because knowing in practice is not the same as theoretical analysis. She brought in her experience in working with other clients and living her personal life. It was an intuitive kind of knowing. Venus, Yvonne, Michelle, and Mary also acknowledged the role of their life experience in enabling them to know their clients in an empathic way. In the past, they turned listening into professional assessment, fitting clients into diagnostic categories. As Venus put it, "I found many families pathological and often criticized my clients. These were what theories said." She achieved a sense of control and certainty when she approached practice as the exercise of professional knowledge. However, after realizing that professional knowledge was not like "things in real life", she could no longer see things entirely through the 'lens' of theories.

No theories can show what is good or right. The client is the person to judge within the broader socio-cultural context that sets the parameters for deliberation. It is not always clear-cut. As Sally pointed out, "We have to be rational, but we are human beings too. We don't do things just because it is right. We need to see things in another person's frame..." She put the ethical character of social work in sharp focus. Technical competence is secondary. Social work is about joining the client to determine what is good and right in her/his life. This is a 'practical activity'—praxis—not a 'technical activity'. That is why social work is premised on a philosophical core that prizes the clients, has faith in their ability to control their lives, and sets the norm of professional conduct as joining the clients' in their effort.

To summarise, beginners follow a 'technical-rational' view of social work practice. Unable to control the practice reality to conform to their image of 'competent practice', they look for authoritative knowledge to provide them with the security of knowing the 'what' and 'how' of practice. They end up fitting reality into a framework of practice or a therapy model. After perfecting their skills to practice in accordance with the framework or model, they gain a sense of certainty and control. It takes some years of intensive learning, mostly in in-service training courses, to attain this semblance of competence. They adopt the 'technical-rational' view of practice. The shift in orientation comes with a re-visioning of how social work can be helpful, which is predicated on relinquishing professional power after coming to terms with the limits of professional knowledge as the authority base for action. The new awakening comes partly from practice experience and life experience, and partly from a renewed understanding of the ethical character of social work practice. They have gone through an ideological turn that restores the foundation of social work. The shift is manifested in three sub-processes under this dimension (A) of change (Table I).

B. A shift in the place of self in social work practice

All the participants went through a period of learning a local version of social work after they started their social work career. It could be relatively easy for some, but difficult for others, depending on how the local version differed from the "official" version taught in initial social work education. Difference can be a contributing factor to work stress if the local practice is far apart from the social work learned at college. Even if the discrepancy is small, beginners still need to learn since initial social work education does not provide an immersion experience in a full-time social work job. The difficulties that beginners face in learning a new practice on the job are invariably multiplied by their egoistic concerns. Beginning practice may present a 'survival crisis' to young social workers. It may lead to premature closure of a social work career. Iris's classmate was an early casualty. Iris also considered quitting the job. Likewise, Sally considered quitting not only the job but also social work in her beginning year. What made beginning practice a hazardous time for most of the participants were the kind of egoistic concerns they

had.

In their student years, they were assessed for their competence in practice. They were given the idea that professional education would prepare them for competent practice. Consequently, they approached every client contact as if it were an 'effectiveness test'. They were concerned about their performance—what to do and how to respond to clients. They attended more to their 'private speech' than to what their clients were telling them. In beginning practice, Sally did not know what to do other than listening and sharing her insights with the client. She was led by the clients, and she was uncomfortable about this. In fact, she was listening to herself—her anxiety about losing direction, being led by the client, and of losing control over what would happen.

Listening is hampered in beginning practice because beginners focus on their 'script' of how their clients should respond. They have plans and they set goals. When things do not happen as intended, as is usually the case, they take it as an indication of their incompetence. As a result, they become increasingly self-absorbed in their egoistic concerns. To protect her self-concept as a social worker, Yvonne blamed her clients for being unmotivated or resistant. Sally felt bad about herself for doing the same thing all the time. Flora was hurt when a client refused to receive her call. Venus had little faith in her assessment in preparing probation reports. In short, beginners show a propensity to 'centring' on the self in practice—whether they are competent, effective, and in control. These egoistic concerns will make beginning practice a stressful time because they will invariably fail.

The first sign of being able to outgrow the beginner status is an emergent sense of confidence in practice. As they become somewhat experienced, hence somewhat familiar with their work, the novelty factor will disappear. Even if they come across a novel situation, they will not feel threatened as before. Indeed, some may approach novel situations as an opportunity for professional learning. However, getting familiar with their work is not the main factor. Rather, confidence comes from the experience of gaining control and mastery in practice after they have found a way to practice. For instance, Sally could win (her client) with "a sense of power and credibility". Yvonne became more confident because she had a 'weapon' to aid

her practice. Listening is not a problem or a concern any more because they know what relevant questions to ask. Knowing what/how to do is not a problem because there is a procedural guide to follow. They are confident because both 'seeing' and 'acting' are guided by professional knowledge. As they become accomplished practitioners, they 'centre' on a framework of practice or a therapy model.

Some time later, a paradigmatic shift in their orientation to social work practice emerges after re-discovering the foundation of social work taught in initial social work education. 'Weapons' are laid aside and helping becomes a 'person-to-person' encounter". They consider their clients "most important". They come to see the significance of listening and understanding in social work helping in a new light, whilst they recognize the intrinsic difficulty of listening and understanding another person. They attempt to understand their clients through the 'use of self'—the self that embodies a pool of interpretive resources acquired from their professional and life experiences. They use their life experience to enhance their capacity for empathic understanding. Their subjectivity enters into practice as an intuitive way of knowing. At the same time, they are reflexive, as they bring the self into the helping process. Sally described her reflexivity in practice: "It isn't that you fill the client with your life experience..." whilst acknowledging her part "in the client's meaning-making (because) the conversation is co-created". Professional knowledge is personalized to form part of the practitioner's interpretive resource. Sally described the process as "working out a theory (therapy) in practice". The action experience of "working out a theory" transforms the 'professional' into the practitioner's embodied knowledge.

The place of self in social work practice, expressed in the idiom 'use of self', has been established since the early days of the profession. However, its meaning is abstract to students. The dominance of the 'technical-rational' view of social work results in privileging objectivity. Subjectivity is equated to personal bias and practitioners should safeguard against this in practice. The place of self is significant in the stories of beginning practice but it is an 'egoistic self', a self-absorption in beginners' need for security and effectiveness. There is a 'centring' on the self in the beginning years. 'Decentring' occurs when the egoistic concerns gradually fade, partly because of familiarity with the job, and partly because of a

growing sense of competence as the practitioner is able to acquire a sense of certainty and control after adopting a therapy model or a framework of practice. The practitioner then centres on the client again, as the object of professional action. When the practitioner later restores the client as the subject in using social work help, the quality of centring on the client changes likewise. The practitioner attends to the client's subjectivity as well as her/his own subjectivity. The shifting orientation toward the place of self in social work practice is manifested in the two sub-processes under this dimension (B) of change (Table I).

C. A shift in the orientation toward the nature of social work knowledge

Social work knowledge assumes central importance because social work has claimed to be knowledge-based professional practice. The relation between knowledge and practice is institutionalised by the 'technical-rational' view of professional practice. Thus, using theories in practice is a central tenet in initial social work education. The notion of 'integration', a complex notion in itself, is presented to students as the application of theories in practice. Implicitly, it presupposes a correspondence between theory and practice, and between the knowledge that guides action and the action itself. Sally's principal concern in beginning practice is her inability to "connect theories with practice". The same preoccupation was echoed in Jane's first and second stories. In the years from the beginning of their social work career to the time they managed to practise a therapy model competently, most of the family service participants tried to ground their practice on theories, in the sense of translating ideas into action. Mary's account of using Brief Therapy as a procedural framework to structure the helping process exemplifies such an achievement. In this view of the 'theory-practice' relation, practice begins from theories, and knowing precedes acting. Likewise, social work curricula often embrace a linear relation between theories and practice. Field-based training is for students to try out the use of theories in practice. Hence, many participants—Venus, Yvonne, Mary, Jane—evaluated their fieldwork experience in this light, and concluded that field-based experience failed to show them how to use theories or therapy models.

After embarking on a social work career, the family service participants began a long search for a framework or a therapy model. Having found it, they took time to learn to apply it. They held the professional worldview that knowing and acting in practice must be guided by professional knowledge. It legitimises the authority of professional knowledge, and this in turn legitimises the exercise of professional power by practitioners. However, the more they attempted to use theories, the more they found it difficult to get a direct correspondence between theories and practice. Jane wrestled with the problem of a lack of correspondence between the group development theory taught and the group transferred to her. She was baffled to find this, as though it was strange to find that reality did not fit theoretical description. Hardly did any participant acknowledge other sources/forms of knowledge apart from professional knowledge. Given the lack of direct correspondence, they must have drawn on other kinds of knowledge but there was no mention of such in their first interviews. Probably the agency culture made it almost inexcusable for them to admit to other forms of knowledge. Flora was atypical in this respect since she worked in a practice setting that devalued the use of theories. However, she was also uncomfortable at practising without a theoretical base.

In the 'technical-rational' view of professional practice, the zenith of social work professionalism is the explicit use of theories to prescribe professional action. Then, the practitioner is able to control what goes on, predict client responses, and what is/is not an achievable outcome at the end. Sally, Yvonne, and Mary felt they had almost reached that point at the time of the first interview. However, there were also signs that they were moving to a broader view of what 'using theories' meant. Sally practised in an eclectic manner, using a framework of integrated elements drawn from several practice models because she had found what was common among them. With the growth of experience—being familiar with these models after "working them out in practice"—she created her own framework that integrated extant professional knowledge with her practice experience. This is a significant endeavour in a professional career. For the first time, the practitioner is capable of creating knowledge for practice. The notion of 'using theories' is not restricted to putting a theory into use directly. It also implies a professional capacity for 'knowledge creation', which means a fundamental change in the conception of

the 'theory-practice' relationship. They are connected in a dialectical manner. Jane's first and second stories offer an elaborate view of how she used theories in practice, how she approached practice as a test ground for theories, and how she transformed professional knowledge into her stock of usable knowledge. As she put it, "The knowledge taught in social work education is not yet the kind of knowledge that I can use." Again, she viewed the relation between knowledge and practice as dialectical. Thus, the authority of professional knowledge for guiding action diminishes. Its utility awaits testing in practice. It will not be usable by itself until one has used it and, in the process, "see how to apply them in my style".

In her story, Jane held a broader view of what constituted knowledge for practice. She worked in a practice setting where, like Flora, the use of theories was not a part of the workplace culture. Jane articulated a pragmatic epistemology—ideas from other sources would become her practice knowledge if they worked. Other family service participants, such as Sally, Yvonne, Venus, and Mary, had revised their views about the role of theories in practice. They would refer to a theory if they found it helpful. They did not stick to one theory. It did not matter much which theory to use since a theory was meant to function as one 'lens', among others, to look at the client's situation/problem. Indeed, they would change their 'lenses' in the process of listening and understanding their clients. They would switch to other theories in the light of "what occurred in the process". In other words, the use of theories is mediated by the practitioner's practice experience. Jane and Venus postulated a 'personality variable' in mediating the use of theories. All the family service participants converged on one point—life experience is important in social work practice, no less important than theories. As Venus discovered, theories sometimes hampered understanding by fitting clients into a generalized scheme of health and pathology. Sally recognized the human side of social work, as people do not always do things because they are right. A practitioner has to draw on her/his life experience to appreciate another person's life.

Thus, the conception of social work knowledge goes through several revisions. Starting from the restrictive domain of professional knowledge and how it is related to practice, the participants gradually revised their view of the connection between knowledge and practice, and broadened their domain of usable knowledge in

practice. As practitioners construct their knowledge in practice, transform professional knowledge into usable knowledge, bring in their biography as interpretive resources for practice, the knowledge domain will in the end defy specification. Social work knowledge is the embodied knowledge that a practitioner brings into practice. Such a shift in the conception of social work knowledge is manifested in the three sub-processes under this dimension (C) of change (Table I).

D. A shift in the ideology of social work professionalism

Initial social work education is more influential as a process of professional socialization than education for competent practice. The many theories and therapy models taught in a social work curriculum do not have immediate use. Nor will they be usable until they are transformed in the course of being used in practice. Rather, initial social work education is a potent force in shaping the professional worldview of a person before s/he enters the profession. Elements of this professional worldview shape beginners' orientation to practice and their conception of the relation between knowledge and practice. The 'technical-rational' view of practice was dominant in the first set of stories. They acquired this view from initial social work education.

At the core of this professional worldview is an axiom that social work is a knowledge-based practice. There is a body of esoteric knowledge and skills that a person needs to learn before s/he can function as a social worker. Initial social work education provides the educational experience to equip the person with this body of knowledge and skills, and to train her/him to apply it in practice. All the family service participants entered their social work career with such ideas in mind. This explained why they were concerned about the adequacy of initial social work education in preparing them for practice. Once they were immersed in real-life practice, they tried to apply what they had learned. Sally wanted to make the connection between theories and practice. Most of the participants soon concluded that they were unable to make the connection. Even worse, they did not find themselves practising like a professional social worker.

There is indeed an image of a professional social worker. Vincent sanitized his

self-presentation to students when he was a new school social worker. However, this is only a surface expression. There is a deeper structure to what 'being professional' stands for, and this shaped the participants' orientation in beginning practice and afterwards. In beginning practice, they dwelt on their experience whilst they enacted their professional role and compared it with their image of professional practice. They realized that they were not professionals because they did not function like one—confident, knowledgeable about what they did, capable of doing it, getting clients to follow their ideas, and being effective. Initial social work education socializes novices to see social work professionalism this way. Indeed, social work students, whenever they feel uncertain about the professional status of social work, compare themselves with doctors.

It was this mismatch between their image of professional practice and their experience in beginning practice that motivated the participants to pursue another cycle of learning after initial social work education. Whilst the latter loaded them with theories, continuous professional learning was oriented toward practice. They looked for professional learning of value for immediate application. If they studied a therapy model in an in-service training course, they did not approach it as a theory, but as a framework for steering action. They looked for the one that could give them a practical guide to performing like an expert—knowing what to do, doing it with a sense of mastery and control, and delivering what they intend to accomplish. When they found one, as many of them did on in-service training courses, they became assured of their professional power to help their clients.

Sally's 'power game' metaphor is an explicit expression of the 'expert' notion of professionalism—professionals have the power to deliver. Whilst doctors have an easier time, social workers face a lot more difficulty, since what they deliver requires their clients to play a part. To get clients playing their part, social workers fit their clients into action schema. Sally was therefore right to see it in the metaphor of a 'power game'. She could win the 'power game' by being "more focused and directive", asking "relevant questions", and avoiding "dwelling too much on listening". To win she had to exercise her professional power in the interactional process with her clients. Thus, the client is the object of professional action to fit them into the practitioner's game plan. 'Resistant clients' are those who

resist playing along. To deliver their expert performance, social workers need to win Sally's 'power game'. Professional power is central to the self-concept of 'professional' social workers.

However, by the time of the second interview, many participants had given up the 'expert' notion and took a completely different view of the nature of social work helping. Sally dropped her 'power game' metaphor and restored her clients to the centre stage of social work helping. She tried to listen and understand "what the client's experience is like" because change had to be authored by the client. Her role was to join the client in exploring what to do and trying it out. Michelle, Yvonne, Mary, and Venus articulated a similar view of prizing the client and seeing themselves helping in an enabling way. Yvonne's explication of this 'enabling' notion of professionalism in a metaphorical language is most vivid:

...to walk with the client, sometimes half a step ahead and sometimes behind. Sometimes we give the client a gentle push; other times we pull. We allow space for the client to examine her problem before taking one small step forward.

Enabling practice takes as its first principle faith in the client's agency in living her/his life, acknowledging that in this the client is the 'expert'. Technical competence will not help if the practitioner does not possess the quality of, as Sally put it, "a good person", "being ethical" and "valuing clients as a person". This change in their professional worldview is phenomenal. An expert will be a poor practitioner in 'enabling practice'. What is the 'seed' of this change? There are different answers from the participants—life experience, practice experience, and coming to terms with insecurity. Yvonne's account is convincing:

I was taught basic values... I knew this mode of practice was good, but I did not experience it this way because I did not follow these basic values and helping principles. Nonetheless, I was aware of this underlying framework. After practising for some time, I began to realize that this should be the way of counselling. Social work education provides us with the foundation.

Social work teachers will find this account re-assuring, even if the impact of professional socialization on students emerges only after they have practised for some years. If these values can never be fully grasped by novices inside a classroom, perhaps this has to be the way things are. The 'expert' notion of social work professionalism motivated practitioners' quest for professional power in the first

part of their social work career. Having acquired it, some years later they relinquish it as a result of an ideological turn, and affirm the client's strength and agency in controlling her/his life. Social workers do not help by making changes happen, but by enabling the clients to decide and pursue their own change effort. This is 'enabling' professionalism. The participants manifested the following changes in how they looked at social work as a professional practice:

- From an 'expert notion' of professionalism to an 'enabling notion' of professionalism
- From seeing clients as an object of practice to seeing clients as the experts on their own lives.

Chapter 17

Being and Becoming a Good Social Worker Learning, Change, and Professional Development

In the preceding chapter, I described the pattern of changes in the professional worldview of the research participants. Are these changes what we call ‘professional development’? In the professional discourse, as well as in workplace conversations, professional development refers to an open-ended process of becoming an ever better social worker. There is a normative undertone that points to some positive changes as a social worker accumulates professional experience with the passage of time. This notion is also associated with ‘learning’ and ‘change’. Development presupposes change, and change comes from learning. In other words, learning, change, and professional development are connected in a linear sequence.

A commonplace notion becomes problematic

However, the more I pondered on my question, the more I came to see professional development as a normative notion devoid of substantive meaning. Does it mean competence? Does it mean more knowledgeable or more skilful? I was unable to pin down its substantial meaning. Perhaps for this reason (not that I was aware of it), I have used the phrase ‘professional learning and change’ throughout the study. The research participants did not use the term either. They talked about professional learning and change, but not professional development. Professional learning and change featured prominently in their narratives, but not professional development. Perhaps it is an abstract concept signifying positive changes in social workers, but saying little about the nature of these changes. If learning, change and development connote something good about a social worker, the patterned changes found in the stories should embody a normative view of social work. It will then be possible to unpack the meaning of professional

development by examining the narrative data in these stories. How can I uncover good social work from these patterned changes? There is a caveat. Not every change will be towards good social work. Some changes may be revised by further changes at a later point in a person's professional life. Moreover, I am not entitled to privilege my normative view. I am going to address this issue later in this chapter.

Conceptual models versus narratives for unpacking the phenomenon of professional development

My concern at this point is to examine professional development as a phenomenon embedded in these stories. People tend to describe a trajectory in a developmental phenomenon when elements of change, order, and structure are invariably implicated in a 'stage-progression' conceptualisation of professional development—a directional progression in a person's professional life. The first set of stories did convey some sort of a trajectory, often implicit rather than explicit. Sally's first story sensitised me to this notion of 'trajectory', as she gave a 'stage-progression' account of the 'path' in her social work career. After completing the second set of stories, I could identify some sort of movement, or trajectory, in each participant's narrative of her/his professional life. However, seeing a life in progression is the property of narrating a life, and any form of stage-progression is a product of emplotment to give order to a life, and there are many plausible plots.

How do I tell what I have learned about the phenomenon of professional development after reading these stories? I could offer a conceptual analysis of professional development in a reductionist language. If I followed this route, it would entail generalizing from the stories a stage-progression model that gives order and structure to the professional lives of the research participants. Seeing a person's life as composed of sequential parts is an artefact of a 'linear' language, and the reductionist language is one. It is ill suited to describe a life process in which meanings of lived experience go through reconstruction all the time. Furthermore, a 'stage-progression' view is only a short way from a causal account of how a social worker moves from one stage to the next. We are then susceptible to

making an over-generalized claim of how professional development should proceed. As the authors of *Using Foucault's Methods* (Kendall & Wickham, 1999) pointed out, "Foucauldians are *not* (my emphasis) into seeking to find out how the present has emerged from the past. Rather, the point is to use history as a way of diagnosing the present." (p. 4) They advised that we should look for contingencies instead of cause. "When we describe a historical event as contingent, what we mean is that the emergence of that event was not necessary, but was one possible result of a whole series of complex relations between other events." (p. 5) In this study, that means identifying the contingencies and describing how they worked in a specific way in a person's professional life. An ideographic reading of professional lives will not be generalisable, but what I look for is new discourse, not generalisability.

I decided to tell a 'grand story' of what a group of social workers went through in their professional lives. I am going to chronicle the participants' account of their professional experience beginning from the point they entered their social work career. A narrative account is suited to an exploration of people's lived experiences and how it assumed individual meanings within the contingencies of their lives. What I learned about the process of professional development will be embedded as reflective discussions in this 'grand story' of how I understood the patterned changes at different points in the participants' social work careers.

Crossing the line: from social work education to the world of practice

Initial social work education provides would-be-practitioners with a body of professional knowledge and a philosophical core that define the 'official version' of social work. Students learn to apply theories in practice in field-based training. At the exit point, they are expected to have acquired competence for practice. In reality, beginners enter their social work careers with varying degrees of readiness. Some feel ill prepared and insecure with their competence (e.g. Yvonne). Some accept their incompetence and prepare to learn (e.g. Flora). Some feel that initial social work education has given them a broad base and basic preparation for a career in social work (e.g. Jane). Some believe that what is learned in social work education will be useful in practice (e.g. Michelle).

Beginners' evaluation of professional preparation depends on their experience of social work education, what they look for and value. Even the same educational experience can have a very different meaning. Most of the participants evaluated the social work curriculum in negative terms, because a broad-based curriculum could only offer a superficial treatment of theories and concepts, and their application in practice. However, Jane and Vincent accepted this as a necessary foundation to prepare them for a social work career. Once they take up their professional role, beginners soon face the fact that they are incompetent as well as insecure and uncertain in practice. Beginning practice is a transition period and all the participants had to rely on their own resources to survive it. Supervisory support did not help even if it were available. Taking up a first social work job is largely a "sink-or-swim" of matter.

In some practice settings, beginners pick up a new version of social work antithetical to the 'official version' taught in initial social work education. Flora learned to distrust her clients. Likewise, Venus was on guard lest her clients tricked her. What they learned in initial social work education was irrelevant because the discourse in the workplace legitimised a different version of practice. Beginners in these practice settings need to learn the local discourse and a new version of hands-on practice. Other practice settings are 'friendlier' to beginners because the local version of social work is a replica of the official version. For the family service participants, it was like taking an extended fieldwork placement. They were expected to ground their practice on theories and therapy models, as if there would be direct correspondence between casework practice and a therapy model. Nonetheless, beginning practice was difficult to them because therapy models were not immediately usable in practice. Field-based training in their student days was not helpful for a variety of reasons: it was not immersion, they could use very few theories, it was more about writing case plans and recording in a theoretical language. Using theories in practice became a primary concern with which they needed to grapple.

Setting-specific variations impose different demands on beginners. Flora and Venus (as a probation officer) learned to practise by reproducing what their colleagues did. Jane learned to organize programmes by referring to programme

reports. They could only learn the new practice hands on. It was easier for Flora, Venus and Jane because they could have access to the work of other colleagues by observation, workplace conversation, peer consultation, and reading reference files. On the contrary, Yvonne worked in isolation and her experience of failure made her feel helpless. For the family service participants, learning to practise meant two things: first, knowing what to do in an interview with a client; second, using theories in practice. They approached every counselling session as a 'competence test', and evaluated their performance in these terms: not knowing what to do or how to respond to the client, lacking a sense of direction, being led by the client, feeling insecure and incompetent.

The family service participants were preoccupied with their self-efficacy as social workers. They were more concerned about their effectiveness than other participants in non-family service settings. Perhaps, this reflected the difference in workplace culture. In Flora's case, the workplace culture did not value competence or effectiveness, but effort and commitment. In the probation service, the important thing for Venus was to submit a probation report to the court on time after interviewing a client once. Initial social work education was almost irrelevant in non-family service settings. Jane discovered the mismatch when she attempted to use group work theories.

Beginning practice is a stressful time

Beginners enter their social work career with the false expectation that they should be competent practitioners and confident in what/how they do in practice. However, being inexperienced, they are simply not competent or confident. The first stories of Sally, Iris, Yvonne, Mary and Flora all had a dominant theme—not knowing what to do in practice. Social work curricula are often frontloaded with theories and therapy models, to be applied in practice later. The assumption is that theories are applicable in a context-free manner. Beginners expect themselves to be able to do this because this is their image of professional practice. However, soon they will find it difficult to apply theoretical knowledge. The family service participants concluded that theories and therapy models were not usable in the way

they had expected. This meant practising without a knowledge base. In her beginning year, Sally found “little to fall back on in deciding what to do”. She described her feeling at that time as “despair and frustration”. She even thought about quitting the job. Other beginners in her centre also experienced the same emotional distress and thought about quitting. Beginners’ desire to serve their clients better is another source of emotional distress.

If professionalism means being knowledgeable and effective, beginning practice is necessarily anxiety provoking because beginners will find themselves neither knowledgeable nor effective. They consider themselves effective only if they could accomplish what they want and get clients to heed their advice. The only way they find themselves knowledgeable is to fit a client to a therapy model that provides ‘recipe knowledge’ to guide them how to ‘see’ a case and what/how to do in practice. They treat even mundane things in practice as something professional, something they must do correctly. For example, Mary looked for ‘recipe knowledge’ on “how to talk to a kid in such a way that he will perceive me as a caring adult”.

The emotional strain in beginning practice is taxing because they treat everything they do as something special, to be carried out in a professional way. They find novelty in almost everything they come across. What is unproblematic to experienced practitioners may be problematic to beginners. They feel insecure about their professional competence. In the first two months, Flora perceived every client contact as a challenge. She did not know what to do when a client failed to show up or postponed a scheduled interview. Yvonne knew that her ‘lay counsellor project’ was not working well. However, for three years, she dared not to change it because she had no other alternatives.

Beginning practice is a time of intensive learning

Beginners need to learn in order to cope with the novelty of practice, and they have ample opportunities to test out new learning. They can derive some embodied knowledge tied to the action context. All the participants had to find a way to learn in beginning practice—reading, consulting professional peers, listening to

workplace conversations, observing other colleagues' practice, studying files, and taking in-service training courses. These learning resources differed in accessibility and utility. Supervisory support in the workplace was at best marginally useful. Flora and Venus learned the local practice mostly by consulting their professional peers. The family service participants had more choice of learning resources, including reading and taking in-service training courses.

Peer consultation is the most accessible kind of learning resource, especially when specific advice is needed to solve problems in practice. In settings where there is an established tradition, beginners learn the local discourse of practice from professional peers. Experienced workers advised Flora not to trust clients, and 'no show' and 'non-contact' were signs of relapse. Professional peers possess the knowledge for carrying out tasks specific to the setting. Venus consulted experienced colleagues about the recommendations made in probation reports. Beginners in the family service setting looked for specific, practical advice on micro-skills. For example, Mary sought advice on "what questions...to ask in the next interview to help the client make her decision".

Practitioners constitute a knowledge community in the workplace. They share a local discourse and a body of workplace knowledge derived from their professional experience. Although social work is an invisible trade (Pithouse, 1987), practitioners will jointly construct the local discourse of practice and exchange their work-related knowledge in workplace conversations. In the absence of this 'oral tradition', much of what individual practitioners learn from their practice will not be available to other practitioners. Beginners are new members to this knowledge community. They are at the receiving end because they need a good grasp of work-related knowledge before they can navigate unfamiliar practice. They need to know the workplace norm so that they will not be too far off from what other practitioners do. After working in the family service job for five years, Jane still could not tell whether she had moved beyond the survival stage because she could not find the norm for judging her practice.

Some beginners seek professional learning because they want to become a better social worker, but the strife to be 'better' is also an expression of their self-

doubt about their ability as a social worker. It will be difficult for beginners to learn from practice because they consume their emotional energy in nursing their sense of self-doubt. It will take some time before they become familiar with their jobs and learn the local discourse and the established practice. They will be able to concentrate their effort on professional learning only until they can get by with everyday work reasonably well. Flora became somewhat settled after working for eight months. Sally passed the 'finding-my-way' stage after six months in the job.

Becoming somewhat experienced may provide beginners with a comfort zone for them to accept their mistakes as a source of 'error learning'. Mary's account of how she improved a school social work programme exemplifies 'error learning' in beginning practice. Sally described it as "growth through making mistakes". She could find the mental space to reflect on mistakes and explore alternative ways to "handle things better". The capacity to reflect on practice is a pre-condition for 'error learning'. At the same time, they will become secure enough to improvise and experiment with alternative ways. This will lead to professional learning that is personalized. However, there is also the risk of pseudo development if they can get on with the job in an increasingly routinized way. As Alan noted, too much experience could constrain a person's perspective.

Learning from in-service training courses

All the participants continued to pursue professional learning after they had settled in their job. The family service participants increasingly turned to in-service training to find 'the way to practise'. Their experience in beginning practice confirmed that they did not have sufficient knowledge and they also failed to apply theories and therapy models. Thus, they looked for courses providing "in-depth drilling on a therapy model" and 'recipe knowledge' prescribing every minutia of practice. Such an expectation reflected the 'technical-rational' view that professional action is knowledge-based. It also reflected their insecurity. Most of the family service participants were avid consumers of in-service training courses. They still pursued this kind of professional learning even after they had shed their beginner status. For example, Mary learned from a trainer "how to introduce myself

to a child". Michelle even joined the same course several times, each time getting something new from it. Their goal was to learn to practise a therapy model in a competent manner.

Access to in-service training varies with practice settings. In-service training courses were less available and of less help to those participants working in non-family service settings. In her first job at a group and community work unit, Jane could find few courses relevant to her work. However, after moving to the family service job, she found more that were relevant. Flora made a similar point. Course content was either too general (e.g. family therapy) and hence could not be transferred to her work, or familiar enough as to resemble workplace conversations. Venus also found it difficult to find time for in-service training in her job as a probation officer. Life became easier after she had changed to family service practice. She could find time to attend courses and try out what she had learned.

Learning from practice

If beginners can rely on the authoritative knowledge of trainers, in-service training will become their primary mode of professional learning, hence perpetuating the 'technical-rational' view of practice and postponing the construction of personal practical knowledge from practice experience. Whilst the family service participants shopped around for courses, the participants working in non-family service settings could only learn from their practice experience. Venus (as a probation officer), Jane, Flora began to learn from their practice experience early on in their social work career. Jane adapted a group development theory for use in a group programme. Flora changed to a clients' perspective in understanding the phenomenon of 'client resistance' and improvised an alternative way to work with 'hostile clients'. Venus devised her own scheme to determine the recommendations to be made in the probation report. However, professional learning derived from practice experience might not be a communicable form of knowledge. For example, Flora wrestled with the problem of putting the practice knowledge she owned in the form of a generalized framework.

The family service participants also learned from their practice experience, as

reflected in Mary's remark: "On the whole, I had learned on the job on my own most of the time." There were similarities in how they learned from their practice experience. In the first interview, Mary offered an account of how she improved her skills in giving compliment to clients through a process akin to Donald Schön's (1983) 'reflection-in-action'. When the client (a mother) did not accept her compliment (a problematic situation), she tried to see why it failed to elicit the kind of response she would expect. She had a hunch that it was "too high a dose of compliment" (framing the problem). Following this, she postulated a guideline for using this skill: "Heavier dose of compliment may work for some clients whilst other clients may only take a lighter dose." She also formulated a 'practical argument' for this: "For those clients who are demanding toward themselves, who are rigid, who are perfectionist, we need to reduce our dose of compliment, especially in the first one or two sessions." Her explanatory account for the variations in client response was a product of pattern recognition after repeated experiences of seeing how a client responded to a compliment. Flora's account of how she improvised a new strategy to work with 'hostile clients' reveals a somewhat similar mechanism of experiential learning. She reframed the situation by taking the client's perspective and improvised a new way of responding to the client's hostile manner.

Practitioners who are reflective are more likely to acquire practice wisdom and perhaps will evolve new ways to practise. In-service training courses contribute to the experiential mode of learning by providing new ideas for framing practice experience and testing in practice. However, the focus of experiential learning varies with a practitioner's epistemological position. In a practice setting where practitioners are expected to practise according to a therapy model, experiential learning is likely to be confined to skilful performance in executing a therapy model. Mary's account of how she learned from experience to refine her skill in giving compliments to clients is a good illustration. Flora's account of how she reframed the meaning of 'client resistance' and learned a new way to handle 'hostile clients' posed an interesting contrast. She was not bounded by an external frame of reference. Instead, she relied on her own interpretive resource to make a new meaning of some recurrent experiences. It led to a reformulation of extant

knowledge and a fundamental shift in her perspective.

Commitment to professional learning

The evidence here is sufficient to warrant the conjecture that the practice setting is a variable in determining the dominant mode of professional learning that beginners pursue after passing through the transition period. They may still need to pursue professional learning even after they have worked for some years. They may need to learn to cope with a more difficult caseload, or to pick up a new job or a new work assignment. Several participants (e.g. Michelle, Venus, Jane, Yvonne) moved to family service after they had worked in other practice settings. Once again, they went through a period of 'beginning practice' similar to that which they had experienced in the beginner year.

However, they pursued professional learning not simply to cope with new things. They were motivated by their commitment to life-long professional learning. Sally considered the "the heart to learn" to be the most important quality of a good social worker. In her first story, Iris also emphasized the need to learn. She regained her resolve to become a good supervisor because of the faith in her capacity to learn from experience. Yvonne considered life-long professional learning as the force that sustained a forward movement in her professional life. Alan felt stagnant in a supervisory position where work life became a routine and there was little room for professional growth. Flora had similar feelings of being trapped in a job with little professional growth, even though she was proficient in doing the job. Indeed, the greatest threat to the participants' sense of well-being was the feeling of being trapped in a job that had become routinized.

Becoming somewhat experienced

How do beginners come to regard themselves as somewhat experienced? In this study, I could find no clear time line to mark the change in status. In our first interview, Alan still regarded himself a beginner in direct practice, even though he had seven years of direct practice experience and another seven years in the supervisory post. Jane had been a family service worker for five years at the time of

our second interview. Yet, she was still not sure whether she had passed the 'survival stage' because she was uncertain about the effectiveness of her casework practice. In both cases, the beginner status was determined not solely by the amount of work experience, but also by practice competence. An experienced practitioner should be effective and competent in practice. Other family service participants, with the exception of Vincent, perceived themselves somewhat competent at the time of the first interview.

Beginner status is also socially ascribed. In Flora's office, most stayed less than a year. Therefore, those who had worked for a little more than a year were already "old-hands". Michelle and Mary became experienced workers when the staff group was mostly made up of beginning social workers. In the workplace, beginners are always at the receiving end in peer consultation. This is another marker of the beginner status. When, however, there is increasing reciprocity, one's sense of beginner status will gradually fade. Mary noted this. At first, there were many occasions when she needed to consult her colleagues. This changed after practising for more than two years. "I have become the one who gives opinion to other people."

Another marker is a beginner's sense of psychological well-being in the professional role. Beyond the transition period, beginners gradually come to manage the job reasonably well, as they become more familiar with the setting, the clients, and workplace practices. Less overwhelmed and feeling more comfortable in their professional role, beginners begin to learn from their practice experience. At first, it is mostly 'error learning'. However, as they become more experienced, there will be less novelty and increasing routinization in performing their professional role. Even if they came across a novel situation, they would be less overwhelmed in coping with it. Flora's account of how she 'softened' up a hostile client is a good example. Some beginners also resort to other learning resources, notably in-service training courses, to improve their practice. Then there comes a time when they begin to feel confident and have a sense of direction in what they do with clients—a stark contrast to how they felt in beginning practice. This is the time they begin to perceive themselves as experienced practitioners.

Becoming competent: The quest for control and certainty in practice

Experienced practitioners may be comfortable with their practice and may practise reasonably well. However, it does not necessarily mean that they are competent. Most of the family service participants (with the exception of Alan and Vincent) perceived themselves as having attained some degree of competence at the time of our first interviews. Mary, who had worked for only three years and was the most junior amongst them, also considered herself “70% competent”. In other words, being experienced may mean being competent in a certain way. Mary considered herself competent in handling parent-child cases but not marital cases. Yvonne regarded herself as competent after working for six years in the family service job. As she put it, “I had a way to make sense of clients’ problems. I knew how to move, as though I am a very confident professional with a good sense of command.” In other words, competence is associated with a self-assuring sense of certainty and control in practice. Other family service participants also expressed rather similar views. Sally, who was most experienced in direct practice amongst the group of family service participants, projected a graphic image of what competent practice was like in her metaphor of “winning a power game”. She made “frequent predictions” and “was right most of the time”. She was “more focused and directive” and able to adjust “the pace and the focus to suit different personalities and cases”.

There was convergence among the family service participants about the meaning of competence. A competent practitioner is one who practises with certainty and control about problem assessment and intervention, who is able to predict what can be achieved and what cannot, and is able to achieve the desired outcome. This interpretation of competence is a derivative of the ‘technical-rational’ view of professional practice. In other words, at the time of conducting the first set of interviews, the family service participants were looking for ‘technical competence’ in practice. They were concerned about performing effectively in their professional role. They subscribed to the ‘expert’ notion of professionalism. At the same time, they recognised there were many shades of competence. There seems to be no clear line between being experienced and being competent. For the majority

of family service participants, their first stories followed a common storyline: they began as an incompetent practitioner, learned on the way, and became somewhat competent at the end. In other words, competence grew with experience. This could be the case for 'technical competence' since skilful performance comes with more practice, particularly so if there was specialisation in a practice approach. Sally, Michelle, and Mary, among others, followed this line to improve their practice. Mary was explicit about this. She would master the practice of therapies one at a time, and that would mean moving from one stage of learning (a therapy model) to another stage (another therapy model).

A therapy model (or a framework of practice) provides a general structure for beginners to follow. It gives a sense of order in thinking and acting, and a sense of direction and progress. A beginner will know what is happening, will have foresight of what to attend to and what will take place, will know what to do and how to act. All these give them a sense of control, a sense of certainty, and a sense of professionalism in having their practice grounded on professional knowledge. Once a practitioner is able to master the practice of a therapy model, s/he will attain a semblance of competence and feel in control. Thus, the focus of professional learning of the family service participants was to learn therapy models and test the efficacy of each in practice. Trainers who were able to 'work out' a therapy model in practice would make it easier for them to import it into their practice, especially if there were specific procedural steps to follow. Mary's account of how she followed Brief Therapy illustrates this point. Overall, trainers and what they taught in in-service training courses were influential in shaping professional learning and change in the family service participants in the first part of their social work career. The effect of initial social work education as a professional socialization agent remained largely intact. They wanted to ground their practice on some external, authoritative knowledge. They still adhered to the 'technical-rational' view of professional practice.

Beyond competence: Fundamental changes in professional worldviews

In principle, there will be no end to professional learning and change so long as a practitioner keeps reflecting on her/his practice experience and learns from it. However, if the attainment of professional competence is the end state, does it mean a finite end to professional development? At the time of the first interview, the family service participants realized that there was room for developing their professional competence. They were committed to continuous professional learning. What would be the direction if professional learning and change were continuous and directional? Mary was explicit about this. She wanted to master the practice of therapy models one at a time. Others were not explicit, apart from espousing a general direction of developing greater competence or improving their practice. Would it mean a ceaseless pursuit of professional competence? However, this would turn professional competence into a normative concept without substantial meaning. Professional learning and change would then be an endless pursuit of something good about practice or a practitioner. But what would that 'something' be? When I met the family service participants the second time (two to four years later), there had been fundamental changes in their professional worldviews that entailed a reversal of what they had previously believed in and valued—technical competence and the expert notion of social work professionalism. How did these changes come about? What 'good' did they stand for if professional development is a normative concept? I am going to answer the first question here. I shall return to the second question later.

With the growth of practice experience, Sally began to realize the importance of understanding and the difficulty in listening to clients. She became more empathic and accepting because increased life experience had led her to "see things in multiple ways." Venus discovered the importance of the 'personal' in social work practice. The way to understand another person's experience would have to be "by way of our life experience". She came to the view that social work practice was not a technical practice, following steps to execute a therapy model. The 'use of self' was involved in making intelligent use of therapy models. How did these changes come about? They could not get these insights from in-service training. The latter would only reinforce the primacy of theories. Rather, they authored these changes

out of their personal and professional experiences, by reflecting on them and recognizing what is 'professional' (e.g. understanding and helping a client) is also 'personal'. The growth in life experience convinced them that theories did not stand for reality, as humanity is far more complex than theories model or explain. This kind of insight would not come early. They would be too young to understand marriage, parenthood, and what it means for people to navigate the relational world and cope with adult life roles. Moreover, these changes would not be possible if they still preoccupied themselves with the application of therapy models in practice. How could they turn their reflection inward if their mind was focused on models, skills, what/how to do, and outcome?

Yvonne, Michelle, and Mary had arrived at similar insights: the role of self, the limit of theories, centring on the client, relinquishing professional power. However, they did not perceive these insights as coming from their personal and professional experiences. They owed these insights to some of the trainers they met in their 'shopping trips' to the in-service training market. In their second stories, the influence of these trainers was prominent and visible; they all cited what their trainers said to convey the new version of social work they now embraced. Yvonne embraced a trainer's view that "the way to do counselling is to walk with the client". Likewise, Michelle learned from a trainer that "we should value the client's participation in the counselling process". Mary acknowledged that the influence of a trainer was foremost in bringing about the change. Why did they accept these views? I think the authority of these master practitioners led to a shift in professional ideology that amounts to a negation of the former version of social work. They validated the new version in their practice, just as they had previously validated the utility of grounding their practice on a therapy model. History seems to have repeated itself. They subscribed to external expertise.

Comparing the accounts of change presented by these two groups of family service participants, the role of experience is apparent. Sally and Venus were the most experienced frontline practitioners among the family service participants. The change in their professional worldview results from an integration of professional self with personal self and an increasing reliance on accumulated wisdom derived from their own experience. When a practitioner attains this state, social work is not simply a body of professional knowledge and skills that s/he employs skilfully. It

has become part of her/his being as a person in a position to help another person. It takes experience, in living one's life and working with clients, as well as continuous reflection on one's experience, before a practitioner arrives at a point when s/he begins to author a personal version of social work that will be constantly revised in the light of her/his on-going experience.

The normative development for social worker

Is professional development a normative concept? Intuitively, we expect a social worker will become a 'better' social worker with experience and age. Given that the research participants in this study were committed to learning and change, we would expect that the stories of their professional lives should reveal what normative development for social workers is like. Instead of adopting an a priori normative view, I am going to compare the pattern of progression and change uncovered in these stories with the research findings reported in the book *The Evolving Professional Self* (Skovholt & Rønnestad, 1995) of a large-scale study of the development of therapists and counsellors over the career life span. These professional disciplines are close enough to social work to warrant making cross-references. The study adopted the stage concept to order the changes with increased professional development, that is, changes with experience and age. The authors identify five stages. The second to fourth stages overlap with the professional life span of the research participants storied in my study. I am going to compare the stage-progression description of the normative development of therapists and counsellors with that of the family service participants described above.

Exploration stage: 2 to 5 years after beginning the professional career

This stage coincided with the time of beginning practice during which the participants went through the transition from being a student to becoming a somewhat experienced social worker. In both cases, beginners were disillusioned to find themselves not performing well, hence they were motivated to pursue new learning. They developed a personal experience base in and through reflection on practice. The focus of learning was different. Therapists and counsellor realized that context-free theory would not be adequate and theory was to serve practice rather

than the other way round. My research participants looked for more theories and how they could be applied in practice.

Integration stage: After 4 to 10 years of practice

Therapists and counsellors developed a conceptual scheme and way of working that reflected their view of human nature and the change process. They had learned the lesson that there was a limit to their professional power in bringing about change in another person. They acknowledged that change came with difficulty, could be minimal, and was constrained by many factors. They did not feel nearly as responsible as beginners do for the change process. They reckoned that their personal lives affected their practice. Older practitioners had more life experiences to draw on for self-disclosure, understanding issues and experiences in life roles. Instead of searching for very specific techniques to learn and apply immediately, they examined practice in broader terms (e.g. the relationship dimension). There was an authentic fit of the person and the therapy/counselling style. The conceptual system had become personalized and individualized. Instead of adhering to a single approach and fitting the client to it, they fit the theory, technique and approach to the uniqueness of the client. They were eclectic or integrative in their approach.

The same description may well apply to Sally at the time of our second interview. The resemblance is striking. Other family service participants espoused similar views about theories being personalized and used to serve practice instead of directing it.

Individuation stage: After 14 to 40 years of practice

After practising for many years, people began to settle down, but they still continued to pursue professional development in a very idiosyncratic way. At the same time, there was the threat of intellectual apathy and exhaustion if the job became routinized or the work environment was unsupportive. They were vulnerable to the feeling of stagnation when there was little professional growth, as though they had reached a plateau in learning. Alternatively, there could be substantial advances. Experience with clients could become the epistemological centre and the source of experientially-based generalizations and accumulated

wisdom. They approached client feedback as a source of professional learning, not a sign of adequacy. Their personal life became very influential, especially major life events, such as parenthood, marriage, and death. They were better able to integrate life experience in a scientific, ethical, and professional way. There was much more use of self, as an instrument of help rather than using techniques and theories as instruments. There was less a need to sound professional than to being one's self. The conceptual system became more idiosyncratic. There was less reliance on theoretical concepts and more use of guiding principles derived from past experience. The structure of the conceptual system was more flexible. They continued to pursue professional learning, but in a self-directed manner.

Again, we find very similar trends in the second stories. Alan's story testified to the apathy and exhaustion in a job in which he could no longer find personal fulfilment. He was executing managerial tasks thrust on him. Iris also went through a time of stagnation when the job became routinized. Venus harboured much grievance against a new management practice that undermined good social work practice. Sally exemplified a seasoned practitioner who could author her practice and was capable of self-directed learning. All the family service participants recognized the role of the 'personal' in their professional work.

On the whole, the stage model described in *The Evolving Professional Self* matches with the pattern of changes described in the 'composite story above. Likewise, some of the change themes (the list below) extracted from this study are also found in the stories:

1. Professional development is growth toward professional individuation. There is higher integration of professional self and personal self. There is growing accumulated wisdom derived from integrated, experience-based generalizations.
2. An external and rigid orientation in role, working style and conceptualising issues increases throughout training and then declines continuously. The professional and the personal selves become closer.
3. As the professional matures, continuous professional reflection becomes a central developmental process.

4. Beginning practitioners rely on external expertise; senior practitioners rely on internal expertise.
5. Conceptual schemes and role-working style become increasingly congruent with one's personality and cognitive schema.
6. There is movement from received knowledge toward constructed knowledge.
7. There is realignment from a narcissistic position to a therapeutic position.
8. Extensive experience with suffering produces heightened tolerance and acceptance of human variability.
9. There is a movement toward increased boundary clarity and responsibility differentiation between oneself and the client.

There is substantial convergence in the findings of this large-scale study and what I learned from reading the stories of the group of family service participants. As social workers continued to pursue professional learning on the job, first relying on external resources and later on continuous professional reflection on their experience with clients and on how their own life experience entered into their professional practice as a resource for understanding and interpreting other people's life experiences, they undergo normative changes in a number of dimensions. These changes stand for 'good' social work and 'good' social workers.

Chapter 18

The 'Knowledge / Practice' Zone and Beyond Social Work, Knowledge Work, and Professional Work

I used to ask students in the part-time programme to select the most significant idea that they had picked up from their initial social work education. Most named 'theories', 'use of theories' or 'integration', and 'professional practice'. In the first interviews, most of the family service participants expressed the same concern about 'using theories'. In subsequent years, they sought for more theories and learned how to apply them in practice. But Flora's account of beginning practice was different. She learned a new practice by following an established local tradition and consulting experienced colleagues. The workplace culture de-emphasised the use of theories. However, like the family service participants, she too became increasingly proficient at practice with increased experience. Were theories irrelevant in Flora's practice setting? Will a theoretical grounding make any difference to practise? If it makes no difference, what is the point of frontloading a social work curriculum with theories? Does it mean that practitioners can learn how to practice on the job? The second interviews suggested that the answers to the questions raised by the first interviews would differ according to when they were answered.

I found a paradigmatic shift in the respondent's conception of practice, of 'using theories' in practice, and of the nature of knowledge used in practice. Their ideas suggested the following thoughts:

1. Knowledge for practice is not confined to theories but includes personal knowledge derived from life and practice experience.
2. Practitioners may know intuitively and act appropriately without consciously thinking about what they do.
3. Practitioners do not stick to one theory. They are eclectic or integrative in using

theories. They draw on ideas from different theories to fit a situation.

4. Practitioners do not begin with theories. Theories serve practice, not to guide it.
5. Practitioners adapt theories for use when they do not fit the practice situation.
6. Theories become personalized after being used in practice.
7. Practice is a theory-testing activity. Theories may be revised or discarded if they do not work.
8. Theories do not represent the reality.
9. Theories do not tell what is right and what is human.
10. Experienced practitioners may have evolved a personal practice style and formulated a framework for practice.

If these ideas hold, much of the official version of social work no longer stands. First, instead of a linear relationship in which theory precedes practice, the two are connected in a dialectical process. Knowing and acting in practice are interrelated activities. Whilst knowing informs acting, the action experience feeds back to knowing and in turn informs it. Second, knowing and acting may be a product of conscious deliberation, but it may also be intuitive and may not be amenable to articulation. Third, apart from formal theories, professional knowledge includes the experiential knowledge that practitioners derive from both their practice and their life experience. Practitioners are knowledge workers as much as they are knowledge users. Accepting these ideas entails a reversal of some received views fundamental to our understanding of the epistemology of practice, the phenomenon of practice, and social work professionalism. I will now re-examine these received views.

Social work: Social workers re-casting the nature of social work

From the early days of Mary Richmond, the forerunners of the profession embraced a positivist epistemology to enhance its rational-technical outlook in order to secure the professional status of the emerging profession. Characterizing social work as a knowledge-based practice is a professionalising strategy. Lack of a theoretical grounding 'demotes' social work to a common-sense way of helping

people. Practice knowledge is acknowledged, but its status is less respectable because it does not give social work an aura of professionalism (Scott, 1990). Modelling itself on the worldview of a profession as exemplified by medicine, social work self-styled itself as a social technology. The legitimacy of intervening into people's lives rests on its knowledge claim. The nature of the theory-practice relation is conceived as 'applied science'. The two are connected in a linear relationship in which theories inform, guide, or prescribe what practitioners do in practice. Theoretical knowledge is the only valid knowledge for practice because, it is assumed, it provides a true representation of the practice reality.

Theory-driven practice versus a two-way connection between theories and practice

Perhaps most beginners 'inherit' this conception of the 'theory-practice relation' from their initial social work education. Thus, all the family service participants (perhaps with the exception of Vincent) were concerned about using theories and which theories were applicable. The agency policy and the workplace culture further reinforced this orientation. Jane got this message from her supervisor the first day in her family service job: "Pick a therapy model to work with a case right from the beginning." A theory-driven practice is premised on the assumption that a therapy model can provide a practitioner with a way of seeing, knowing, and acting. It is assumed that there will be a direct correspondence between the practice reality and the therapy model that depicts it. The client is an inert variable. The practitioner approaches practice as the execution of a therapy model, which presupposes what is looked for. If the practice reality does not conform to the model, the mismatch would be attributed to deficiencies in the practitioner's skills and competence, or to resistance in the client.

Mary's account of beginning practice is a good illustration. She adopted the 'good child, bad child' script to comprehend parent-child problems, as though the script were generally true. She followed the procedural framework of a therapy model to structure the casework process. When a client responded negatively to her compliment, she did not question the therapy model itself. Instead, she blamed

herself for giving too heavy a 'dose of compliment'. Thus, following a therapy model may trap us in a 'tunnel vision', seeing what the model predisposes us to see and interpreting our practice experience according to some a priori notions. Since Mary framed the episode in skill terms (the skill of compliment), she interpreted it as an indication of her skill deficit. Indeed, many beginners tend to blame themselves for failing to learn theories properly or lacking the skills to use them, when they face difficulties in grounding their practice on theories. They seldom question the presupposition that these theories are unproblematic.

However not all the practitioners followed this route. Jane's orientation was different. In her view, theories were approximations of the practice reality. They might not fit the reality. Theories would have to be modified before they could be applied. In one example, she adapted a group development theory to an on-going group with open membership. Furthermore, rather than seeing theory and practice in a linear relation, she posited a bi-directional, two-way connection between them. She began from the practice-end, noting features that reminded her of certain concepts or ideas of a theory. The latter in turn gave her perspectives to 'see' and hypotheses to test in practice. If these concepts and ideas did not work, she would try others. She did not adhere to one theory. In addition to drawing ideas from theories, she also drew ideas from other sources. She did not regard theoretical ideas as superior to other ideas. Unlike Mary, who had a therapy model as her reference point, Jane held theories and practice as two separate but interrelated reference points. Theories would guide practice whilst the latter would determine the utility of a theory. In this version of the 'theory-practice relation', practitioners do not simply execute a therapy model. They attend to two reference points at the same time—the 'here-and-now' in practice and theories as an intellectual resource for deliberating on practice. They have to judge the utility of an idea in the light of their immediate practice experience. The relation between knowing and acting is not a linear one: beginning with what we know and deriving action from it. Rather, the relation is dialectical. We act in a knowledgeable way, and we generate new knowledge from our experience of acting.

Practice in lieu of theoretical grounding

Flora and Vincent embraced yet another version of the ‘theory-practice relation’ in their beginning practice. In Flora’s case, the workplace culture discouraged her from using theories. Practice was guided by experience, not by theories. Even if she wanted to use theories, she would not find any relevant to her work. In other words, the practice setting was an important variable in shaping the nature of the ‘theory-practice relationship’. However, after Flora had mastered the practice, increasingly she aspired to ground her practice on theories. Her concern was not about using theories to guide practice but to gain professional status. Jane had expressed this view also.

Vincent held a similar but less conventional view. For him, practice was driven by ideology, not theories. It was the commitment to meet the needs of clients that was important. The ‘how’ was not problematic. Using theories in practice was merely a self-serving act to display one’s professionalism.

Perhaps Vincent was right, given that Flora mastered practice without recourse to theories. Finding a theoretical grounding for practice serves the purpose of strengthening the professional status of social work. Instead of using theories to serve practice, theories are used to advance the cause of social work professionalism. In so doing, practitioners become the end-users of professional knowledge. In fact, they can produce their own theories of practice by theorizing on what they do in practice. Flora explored this idea in our last interview.

An enlightened view: The ‘theory-practice relation’ and the phenomenon of practice

In the second interviews, the family service participants had revised their previous orientation toward the ‘theory-practice relationship’. First, they recognised the limit of theories. Theories do not represent the reality or account for what is human and what is right. Second, it was not right to fit practice to theories, as this would necessarily require fitting clients to theories. Rather than seeing theories as plans for navigating practice, they perceived theories using the ‘lens’ metaphor—a

theory is a way of seeing (Hoffman, 1990). Third, they did not begin with theories. Instead, they bracketed out theories first. They began with what they understood about their clients and, on that basis, looked for theories that could help. Theories were to serve practice, not direct it. Fourth, after using a theory in practice, it became personalized as embodied knowledge of the practitioners, which was tied to the action context. Fifth, they used theories in an eclectic manner, picking up elements from different theories as they deemed fit and bringing them together to constitute a personal framework.

Jane's description of how she practised offered a rare insight into the phenomenon of practice. Practice is not a course of planned action, as the 'technical-rational' view of practice will have it. Instead, a practitioner has to respond to the 'here-and-now' and shift from one focus to another in an unfolding process. The practice reality is a field of uncertainty. Hence, the notion of following a theory from beginning to end is untenable. A practitioner has to exercise judgment as to what s/he considers pertinent and renew her/his understanding of the client along the way. Therefore, listening and understanding are fundamental to practice. Furthermore, judgement and understanding involve the 'use of self'. Knowing is not simply theoretical or analytical. It can be intuitive: what Sally referred to as "professional artistry". As the focus changes, it will not be possible for the practitioner to adhere to one theory and a plan of action. S/he will have to call on another theory to provide a way of seeing when a new focus emerges. It is in this sense that practitioners use theories to serve practice. The 'self' of a practitioner is central to social work practice. Hence, subjectivity becomes important.

Beyond the 'technical-rational' view: The moral-ethical character of social work

Vincent's story of his failure to help a career woman adjust to being a full-time mother testifies to the limits of social work helping. He would not be the only one who was 'humbled' by failure and thus came to see the limits of technical competence. Evaluating one's practice in terms of effectiveness is a legacy of the 'technical-rational' view, which approaches practice as a 'staged performance' by

the actor/ practitioner. However, there are times when human problems are beyond the reach of technical solutions. Vincent's next story of his failure to help a student revealed the moral-ethical nature of social work practice. What he considered good for the client might not be perceived so by the latter. "What is good?" turns out to be a question with no fixed answer. Hence, a practitioner will have to bear the ethical responsibility in deciding what is good for a client. As Whan (1986) put it, "Such practice cannot be a method or a technique applied to a person or a thing in which the practitioner remains untouched in his or her being, but is one in which the person is intrinsically involved... To know something morally is a requirement to act in a certain way with regard to that knowledge. What matters is not only what we know, but what we *are*" (emphasis original, p.246).

What is the nature of social work? I learned from the participants that there were many faces to social work. Its nature depends on, among other things, our epistemological stance—what constitutes the knowledge for practice and how the two are related. In the 'technical-rational' view, social work is a scientific practice. Empirical knowledge provides evidence-based guidance for practitioners to determine what to do and how to act, but this is an old promise yet to be fulfilled. Even if we could fulfil this promise, is this what social work should be about? Imagine social workers doing things on their clients as though they are inert variables. They begin with theories, give clients standard responses, and are only concerned about their own effectiveness. They are able to fit clients to their theories because they take their professional power for granted. And where theories originate from outside practice, then practice is being fitted to something extraneous, for example turning social work into behaviour modification.

If theories originate from practice, they represent what practice is like, and they will coincide with our practice experience. However, theorizing practice is a rare phenomenon in the local social work community. First, practitioners are not expected to theorize as part of their everyday work. On the contrary, they are expected to use theories. Second, even if there were such an attempt, as when Flora tried to articulate her practice knowledge into a generalized framework, there are two unresolved issues. First, how can practitioners uncover their practice knowledge from what they do and their accounts of it? Second, what is the textual form best suited for

communicating practice knowledge to preserve its context-dependent nature? These are thorny issues, and they stand as obstacles to practitioners who wish to theorize their practice, codify and communicate their personal theories to others (Kwong, 1996).

In the second interviews, the family service participants presented an alternative view of the nature of social work that is premised on a different ideology. Yvonne's metaphor of 'journeying with the client' suggests that change is to be authored by the client. Helping is not by exercising professional power to fit clients to our theories, winning the 'power game', or subjugating them to our 'weapon' of helping. Participants had relinquished their professional power because they did not need it in the enabling role of helping. These changes came about after they had learned from their own expanding life roles what their clients had experienced in carrying out theirs. They came to terms with the limits of their professional power and their knowledge claims. They became 'humbled' professionals. All these changes coincided with the infusion, of post-modern thoughts on knowledge, truth, discourse, and power, into the professional discourse.

Knowledge work: Social workers at the epistemic centre

I had further thoughts on epistemological issues after the last interview with Flora (the fifth one in the series). At the time Flora began her social work career, her epistemic centre was her practice experience. Five years later, she shifted her centre to theories and frameworks for practice. By contrast, the family service participants had their epistemic centre on theories in their beginning years, but began to question the epistemological status of theories after they had become competent in practising a therapy model.

What counts as professional knowledge?

Flora could tell beginners what to do if they came across problems in practice. She possessed some practice knowledge that enabled her to act intelligently in a concrete situation. However, she was unable to articulate "a framework, a systematic way of handling cases" in orientation talks and practice manuals to support

beginning practice because “every client was unique”. In other words, she was unable to translate contextualized knowledge (what to do in a concrete situation) to de-contextualized knowledge (a framework of practice).

Failing to articulate such a framework made her doubt her professional status. She accepted the ‘expert notion’ of professionalism that has dominated the professional discourse. Professional practice is based on a body of esoteric knowledge, methods and skills exclusively owned by practitioners, who should be able to articulate their ‘method’ of practice. Acting intelligently is a necessary but not sufficient condition for justifying the claim of professional status. Flora’s quest to articulate her method of practice was to establish this status.

The question “What is professional knowledge?” provokes us to re-examine our claims of professional status for social work. What is the knowledge status of the body of institutionalized professional knowledge? Must professional knowledge be a theoretical, generalized kind of knowledge? What about the practice knowledge that practitioners own and which enables them to act intelligently? How do we know what we know that enables us to act intelligently in practice? If there are many kinds of knowledge, how do we know what we know is the kind relevant to what we do? What is that relevance?

In social work, the positivist-empiricist paradigm has historically been embraced as the only epistemology for social work practice. Privileging scientific knowledge has been part of our professionalizing strategy. We borrow the power that science enjoys to lend credibility to our own professional power. Thus, our quest for scientific social work is to develop scientific knowledge—law-like generalizations produced through a process of scientific inquiry—that can be applied by practitioners irrespective of the particular practice context. Thus, we accept the view that social work knowledge is context-free and applicable irrespective of the client or the situation. Application of knowledge in practice is unproblematic, so long as the practitioner is competent. The practice knowledge of individual practitioners is seen as inferior knowledge because it is neither systematic nor generalisable.

However, privileging context-free knowledge is paradoxical since, to

practitioners, social work knowledge assumes meaning within the action context of practice. Knowledge is inseparable from the form of human practice it is about. If the social work profession has privileged scientific knowledge over other forms of knowledge, it does not mean that scientific knowledge is epistemologically superior. How we know is intricately related to what we need to know. There can be many ways of knowing and hence many forms of knowledge. If social work practice is concerned about problem-setting and the ethical-moral consideration in discerning the 'good' with and for the client, it involves discourses on values and feelings. Then, what practitioners need is practical wisdom—knowledge that is founded on “practical rationality”.

Flora could act intelligently in practice. She could demonstrate to beginners how to work with clients in a concrete situation, and they could pick up her practice knowledge embedded in her action. Michael Polanyi (1962) calls it ‘tacit knowledge’ since it is not immediately amenable to articulation. There is a parallel between how to ride a bicycle and how to practice. Both involve ‘embodied knowledge’ (Johnson, 1989), which is knowable only in the person’s action experience. Much of this knowledge cannot be articulated, least of all in the form of context-free, propositional knowledge. Flora’s experience in learning to practise a new skill is a good illustration. “If I don’t practise it, I wouldn’t know the skill.” There is something knowable that can only be known in the action experience of practising a skill.

Knowledge creation in practice

Social workers’ practice knowledge is learned from their practice experience. Flora evolved a way of practice based on ‘knowledge of result’—“what I learned from practice that worked”. What worked is the criterion that practitioners adopt to judge the knowledge status of an idea, a strategy, or a hypothesis. If it worked, it would become the person’s practice knowledge. Beginners adopt this ‘pragmatic epistemology’ to help them navigate their practice and learn to improve it. Mary derived ‘error learning’ by noting mistakes she made in a school social work programme and improved the programme design next time. Jane learned by a process of ‘trial-and-error’. She approached practice both as a theory-testing activity and as

an occasion to adapt theories to suit the reality of practice. In other words, knowledge is created as practitioners use their knowledge in practice. Mary and Jane would not have been able to discern useful knowledge from their practice had they not been able to tell "what worked".

Donald Schön (1983) offers an account of how practitioners create practice knowledge by monitoring their practice experience, reflecting on it, and discerning patterns to order their experience. Practitioners often engage in this mode of experiential learning to gain a sense of direction. For instance, in Flora's office, social workers found the pattern that 'no show' or 'non-contact' was often a sign of relapse.

As a practitioner experiences many variations of a small number of types of cases, he is able to 'practise' his practice. He develops a repertoire of expectations, images, and techniques. He learns what to look for and how to respond to what he finds. As long as his practice is stable...knowing-in-action tends to become increasingly tacit, spontaneous, and automatic... (p. 60)

The role of repeated experience is significant in allowing people to discern patterns. Jane could tell whether a woman would actually divorce her husband by the pattern she noticed in the manner women in an extramarital relationship behaved in their interviews. Women who regularly vented their feelings and complained about their husbands but did not take any action were likely to stay in the marriage. Others, who asked for information about how to get a divorce and about a single-mother life style were likely to divorce their husbands in the end. Such experientially derived knowledge is a practical kind of knowledge that enables a practitioner to act in a relatively effortless way. As such knowledge will increasingly become tacit, the practitioner may not be able to articulate it even within the action context. The knowledge revealed in Flora's practice, and which beginners could pick up from observing what she did, is this kind of knowledge. Although she was not able to present her 'method' in the form of a generalized, systematic framework, she did, nonetheless, possess a 'method'.

Schön (1983) furnishes another account of how practitioners derive practice knowledge from practice when they come across novel situations, situations of uncertainty, and situations in which the old ways of acting fail to work. He calls this

phenomenon 'reflection-in-action', that is, "thinking about doing something while doing it" (p. 54). This kind of reflection "tends to focus interactively on the outcomes of action, the action itself, and the intuitive knowing implicit in the action" (p. 56). Through 'reflection-in-action', practitioners "construct a new description of it, and test the new description by an on-the-spot experiment". (p.63) In his second book *Educating the Reflective Practitioner* (Schön, 1987), he elaborates further on what 'reflection-in-action' is like:

When the practitioner reflects-in-action in a case he perceives as unique, paying attention to phenomena and surfacing his intuitive understanding of them, his experimenting is at once exploratory, move testing, and hypothesis testing. The three functions are fulfilled by the very same action. And from this fact follows the distinctive character of experimenting in practice. (p. 72)

In the second interview, Flora recollected a practice episode in which she learned a new strategy for work with a 'hostile client'. Her account offers a good illustration of how a practitioner created practice knowledge to cope with a difficult situation. She used 'reflection-in-action', as she reframed the situation in a manner that empathized with the client's feeling. She recalled what she learned from a somewhat similar experience in her fieldwork placement and, on that basis, improvised a new strategy to "soften up" this 'hostile client'. It worked, and she learned a new way to work with this type of clients. If such practice knowledge is useful knowledge for practice, Flora was also a knowledge worker. All practitioners are potentially knowledge workers because they are in the position to learn from their practice experience. They are capable of revising old knowledge and creating new knowledge when they face novel or difficult situations in practice. The knowledge they generate from practice is empirically tested and also proximal to practice. It will be usable by them in similar situations in future.

The epistemological status of practice knowledge

The practice knowledge that practitioners generate from their practice is case-based since it is derived from a specific action context. Therefore, it is not generalisable. Nonetheless, the epistemological status of case-based knowledge is a valid one since a case-specific account of practice will bear relevance to future practice. Flora reckoned that "the pattern that I have developed over these years is

derived from my experience of what would work”. “What works?” is a prevalent question that focuses practitioners’ attention on the connection between action and outcome. It involves an informed kind of ‘trial-and-error’ process that is similar to what we do in everyday life. We would not be able to function in our daily life if we were not able to anticipate with sufficient certainty how our actions may affect the world around us. Pattern recognition is the way we give order to our life and the world we live in. We do not need research training to navigate our lives in the world with a sense of order (Sheppard, 1995). If Flora had monitored the connection between action and outcome, it would not be difficult for her to evolve a ‘method’ of practice with the growth of practice experience. Therefore, practice is also a theory-construction activity if we broaden the meaning of ‘theory’ to include ‘practical arguments’ that practitioners invoke to explain or justify their action. If a course of action leads to the expected outcome with sufficient frequency, the ‘practical argument’ will then be accepted as valid knowledge for practice.

Generalizing from case-based knowledge

Case-based knowledge is context-dependent. However, it is possible to transform it into de-contextualised knowledge through a process of successive reduction. The aim is to remove, in successive steps, context-dependent elements from the emergent pattern until we reach a point at which the resulting pattern is no longer context-dependent. The result is a systematic framework whose utility is no longer constrained by contextual variables. This framework is still useful even if every client is unique. Flora also reached this conclusion in the interview. “We can only offer a framework—why ask questions this way, what is good about it, and what you can do more about it.” A framework offers principles and procedures for guiding action in practice. It does not prescribe exactly what/how to do, but this should not be a problem for practitioners. Drawing on principles and procedural frameworks to deliberate on what to do is what practice entails. However, simply articulating a systematic framework is not good enough because any knowledge claim in professional practice should be based not only on what works but on how and why it works. Practitioners need to theorize their practice knowledge so as to explain and prescribe the ‘how’ of practice. Again, they will not find it difficult to do so because

theorizing is also what people do in everyday life. I offered Flora the following advice on how her case-based knowledge may be represented in the practice manual so that beginners can profit from her practice knowledge.

Although you can't fully describe how you asked your client questions, it doesn't matter because there is no need for another worker to imitate it. We have picked up such things from our immersion in the local culture... The most important thing is that we need to know the logic behind your question as well as your reflection and analysis of this logic afterwards. Since you have reported your reflection and analysis, we have a reference point to see how the client will respond when we do that. How our clients actually respond will then furnish the feedback for re-examining your logic. We may modify your logic and the action derived from it. Thus, it is good to have access to your practice experience even if it is in textual representation... We won't have a way to think if there is no reference point. You have many reference points because of your experience... We have experience, but seldom examine it in great detail and articulate it in a thorough way... Your manual is not the usual kind of manual that prescribes steps. That is not helpful given the uniqueness of each client. Your manual will tell how you look at it when you face a practice situation. It can be action-based, forming a perspectival view after doing something. Or it can be theoretically based, deriving a perspectival view from a theory. These ideas will not prescribe doing A, B, C, D, and E. Rather, these ideas give beginners the resource to think about action.

I felt hopeful after that interview with Flora. Five years into her social work career, she had become intelligent in her work of counselling drug addicts. She had created a body of practice knowledge that enabled her to practise with proficiency. If she could articulate this body of knowledge and communicate to others, later generations of beginners would not have to repeat a long learning process to arrive at what she had learned. Her account establishes a central role for practitioners in producing knowledge. Acknowledging that there are many ways of knowing (Hartman, 1990), we open up a broader epistemological universe for social work that permits a more encompassing view of what counts as knowledge, who owns that knowledge, how such knowledge can be known, and how the knowledge connects to our practice in a dialectical relationship. This new epistemology of practice will open up a vast untapped pool of re-generative force that has long been suppressed under the theory-practice hierarchy. However, to unleash this re-generative force, we need to re-order the institutional relationship between knowledge production, professional education, and direct practice within the professional community.

Professional work: Re-thinking social work professionalism

The history of social work is a history of the professionalisation of social work. Our forerunners used the medical profession as a model for social work, hence we embrace technical rationality and seek to ground social work practice on scientifically derived knowledge (Franklin, 1986). This necessarily presupposes the exercise of professional power in working with clients and gives rise to the 'expert notion' of social work professionalism. Social workers are competent professionals who know what to do and can do it effectively. That explains why the family service participants geared their professional learning to striving for competence, seeking to achieve control, certainty, mastery, and effectiveness. However, competence alone does not legitimise our professional claim. Professional work must be work done only by practitioners, qualified to perform after a long period of professional training. Thus, social work helping is to be set apart from informal helping. For this reason, social work professionalism is also premised on a strict separation between the 'professional' and the 'personal'. Social workers must draw on their professional knowledge to help their clients. Any knowledge outside the professional domain is not considered legitimate knowledge. The 'self' is bracketed out because personal bias and subjectivity are antithetical to rational inquiry.

The ideal image of a professional practitioner is one who is confident, knows what to do to and how to do it, and is able to accomplish the desired end. Sally questioned her competence as a social worker when she was led by her clients, was not sure what to do or what the outcome would be, and was not feeling confident. These factors undermined her sense of professionalism. How can a practitioner achieve control and certainty? Increased experience will help a beginner to routinise certain tasks and familiarise her/himself with the demands of the job and the experience of meeting clients. However, routinisation also means doing the expected, adopting a fixed view, or following a fixed way to act. Alan noted this. Social workers routinely waitlisted elderly clients for tangible services and then shelved the case file for later action. Practitioners are able to fit their clients to routines because they wield the professional power to determine what needs to be done. Another way to achieve control is to fit their clients (and their practice) to an action schema, hence the search for a framework of practice or a therapy model. They believe in the

authority of professional knowledge to provide the basis for effective practice. Mary used professional knowledge as a script to understand parent-child problems and as a procedural framework to act. Yvonne was “not so blind” after she had adopted a therapy model to practise. Practitioners become the conduit to bring a therapy model to work on a client. Thus, practice is turned into Sally’s ‘power game’ of getting clients to follow the practitioner. Changes in the client demonstrate the practitioner’s competence and effectiveness in executing a therapy model.

However, the ‘expert notion’ of social work professionalism necessarily gives way to an ‘enabling notion’ if social workers help not by professional power based on professional knowledge, but by their sensitivity in listening and understanding their clients, coupled with their ability to make available new ways for their clients to see and act in their lives. One cannot base social work professionalism on the authority of professional knowledge when, as the research participants have discovered, the personal quality of a social worker is crucial to social work helping. The practitioner is at the centre of social work, defining its nature, what constitutes help, the nature of the helping relationship, and what is knowledge for practice. As the participants showed in this research study, practitioners make social work what it is and reproduce practice as well as re-generating it, creating practice knowledge along the way.

Chapter 19

Social Work Education and Beyond **Preparation and Enrichment of a Social Work Career**

Re-thinking the aim of initial social work education

Initial social work education is the common launching pad for a career in social work for most social workers. I began this study with the assumption that social work students would invariably find their initial social work education inadequate in preparing them for practice, hence my concern about how beginners come to learn social work practice on the job and excel over time. I was postulating a process of professional learning and change. However, after collecting the first set of stories, I realized that this was a simplistic way to frame what is essentially a complex issue.

Opinions diverged among the participants about the aims of initial social work education. Some never expected that initial social work education would equip them for practice. There was too large a range of professional knowledge and skills to cover in too little time. Among those participants who expected adequate preparation for practice, there were different interpretations of what 'preparing for practice' means. Moreover, a person might hold different views at later points in her/his social work career because s/he had changed her/his conception of social work, of the connection between theory and practice, and of the nature of knowledge for practice. Table 2 presents the diversity of opinion among the participants at two points in time. Evaluative themes (e.g. "practice is unrelated to training") are highlighted in bold types and illustrated by narrative data.

On the negative end of the continuum, several participants considered their initial social work education hardly adequate in preparing them for practice. They could pick up only bits and pieces in a superficial way because the curriculum was

too loaded with theories, and the treatment of social work values and principles too abstract and high-sounding. They only picked up some vague ideas, sometimes no better than a bunch of names and terms. How could they apply theories and therapy models in practice? In field training and beginning practice, they did not know what to do. They made mistakes. They could not help their clients. In short, they felt incompetent.

Table 2

Participants' Opinion Towards Initial Social Work Education

	1 st interview	2 nd interview
Sally	<p>Practice is unrelated to training</p> <p>Training may shape the way to think about practice, but only in practice do we know whether something works or not.</p>	<p>Training for technical competence displaced the essence of social work</p> <p>It biased students to focus on their ability to apply theories and techniques indiscriminately in practice, but failed to develop their sensitivity and respect for clients.</p>
Iris	<p>The separation of theory and practice</p> <p>I was insecure because of inadequate training to provide me with a solid theoretical base. I was ill prepared for grounding practice on theories.</p>	
Alan	<p>Inadequate training for technical competence</p> <p>It was too brief, covered a bit of concepts but little on skills and treatment approaches. It was inadequate.</p>	
Venus	<p>To be prepared for connecting practice to theories</p> <p>I could only try out a few easier theories in my fieldwork.</p>	<p>Social work curriculum was too broad and superficial</p> <p>The two-year training was very inadequate. It was too generic,</p>

	Nonetheless, I felt prepared for practice, casework in particular.	too broad, global and superficial, covering bits of this and that.
Yvonne	<p>Inadequate training for practising therapy models</p> <p>Initial training failed to help me in the practice aspect. I picked up only the names of therapies and models but not able to use them.</p>	<p>Social work values lay the foundation of social work practice</p> <p>I got something valuable—messages on social work values. These values have influenced my conception of good practice and my direction of professional development ever since. We cannot work with clients if we fail to follow these values and principles.</p>
Michelle	<p>Whatever learned has bearing on practice</p> <p>Practice is a whole-person involvement. Whatever we learn has bearing on our practice. Although the match between training and practice is not perfect, training is still useful if I can internalise the course input and use it in practice.</p>	
Jane	<p>Provide me a foundation for practice</p> <p>It is useful in helping me to build up a foundation from scratch. It furnished me a period of self-development, and helped me to form my values before entering into practice. I got a broad knowledge base and a general understanding of the field of social work. Its influence on me is active even to date.</p>	
Mary	<p>Enable me to apply therapy model in my job</p> <p>I got a general overview of the field of social work and got some basic knowledge and skills. I could have the opportunity to practise therapy</p>	<p>A broad-based curriculum provided the basic for practice</p> <p>There is bound to be mismatch between social work training and real-life practice because</p>

	models in my fieldwork placements. The experience enabled me to apply these models in my job.	the former has to be basic and broad-based. It is adequate in preparing me for practice, though I still need to learn on the job.
Chung-yiu	<p>It lays down the groundwork for beginning practice</p> <p>All the elements are there. Every social worker has to start with something basic and formalized to enable her/him to practise in an intentional manner. It lays down the groundwork such that students can move from a "skill orientation" to a "relationship orientation" in the transition to beginning practice.</p>	<p>Theories and models are useful in practice</p> <p>I realize that there is intelligence in these theories and models. We need to base on a theory to bracket off personal bias and subjectivity.</p>
Flora	<p>Some crude ideas for beginning practice</p> <p>Some sort of awareness beforehand even if I made a mistake. Some crude ideas to 'apply' and communicate with colleagues.</p>	

Other participants did not fault initial social work education because they recognised the need for a broad-based curriculum to provide them with the 'foundation' for practice. Elements in this foundation were necessarily context-free to encompass the diversity of social work practice. Thus, there would not be any direct correspondence between education and practice in beginning practice, but the practical relevance of these elements would become apparent in practice. They prepared to learn on the job.

In my view, examining the meaning of 'preparing students for practice' furnishes a useful platform for staging a critical review of social work education in Hong Kong. First, how we look at social work practice determines what is required of the person who practises it. Second, the benchmark for beginning practice determines what we expect a programme of initial social work education should

accomplish in preparing students for practice at its exit point. There are two related issues here: what constitutes 'beginning competence' and what students should be equipped with to meet the benchmark. Third, there is the issue of what/how we teach social work students. Most of the social work students in Hong Kong are young secondary school leavers. They have little life experience; yet they are going to work with clients having all sorts of problems in life. The social work curricula are strikingly similar in their emphasis on teaching theories but making little reference to the practice world.

Education for competence is a misplaced aim

The idea of 'education for competence' is perpetuated by social work educators, notably with the advance of 'competency-based social work education' in the eighties, in keeping with the 'gate-keeper role' of initial social work education. The curriculum was geared towards equipping students with the competencies required of them for beginning practice. Such competencies were couched in behavioural terms in Hong Kong. Social work teachers determine what constitute social work competencies and how to impart them to social work students. Given their institutional location, social work teachers conform to the norms of higher education, and that widens the gap between social work education and social work in the real world. Social work curricula are often front-loaded with theories whilst there was little reference to experience (Eraut, 1994). The assumption is that if beginners 'banked' more theories and used them in practice, they will be competent social workers. This is the 'technical-rational' view of professional practice.

All the participants acquired this competence orientation from initial social work education. The family service participants made conscious attempts to apply theories in practice, and pursued professional learning to master the practice of a therapy model, probably reflecting the rise of clinical practice (Specht & Courtney, 1994). Because of the emphasis on application and performance, social work students acquire the misconception that there is a right way to practise and learning the 'how' is important. When they enter beginning practice, they harbour the false notion that they should be competent. Thus, they are preoccupied with egoistic

concerns, such as whether they are effective, in control, clear about what they want to do and can do it. However, the participants in this study found it difficult to apply theories or therapy models in beginning practice. At best, they could speak the language, but were unable to put these theories and models into practice. Field training should be the vital component to help them make this connection. However, it would be unrealistic to expect the development of competent practice in field training.

The 'technical-rational' view of professional practice assumes a strict separation of the 'personal' and the 'professional'. Competence is framed in 'technical' terms of executing therapy models and acting in a theory-driven manner. In this conception of professional practice, the 'personal' is irrelevant except as a source of subjective bias that may compromise professional action. But what if the 'personal' and the 'professional' are not separate realms in a social worker's life? As we learned from the second set of stories, there was the new awareness that the 'personal' played a significant role in social work practice. In one version, the 'personal' enters into practice because one's life experience enhances the capacity to understand and empathize with a client. In a second version, the 'personal' and the 'professional' are in unison when one's experience in each realm feeds back to the other. However, the aim of initial social work education is biased towards teaching theories and therapies. In the second interview, Sally advised that the aim should be the education of the self. She has a point since social work is about people's lived experience in the relational world of family, marriage, parenthood, work, and generalized others. The interface of the 'personal' and the 'professional' lies in our understanding of the human life through living and reflecting on our own life.

Even if we accept education for competence is the aim, we are not sure what students need to learn because what constitutes social work competence is ambiguous. In the study, the benchmark for beginning practice in family service was the worker's effectiveness in helping their clients. The benchmark was less clearly discerned in other practice settings. In a drug rehabilitation setting (Flora's account), the benchmark was not so much about effectiveness as about effort and survival since, at most, social work help would only be marginally effective. In the

probation service (Venus's account), the benchmark had nothing to do with effectiveness at all. Social workers were only concerned about coping with a heavy workload under a very stringent time limit. The performance norm was about efficiency in processing social investigations and preparing court reports.

A critique of the social work curriculum

One aspect of the phenomenon of practice is about 'using knowledge'—how social workers use context-free knowledge to enable them to act in an intelligent way in action. Practice is by its nature unique. However, professional knowledge must be context-free. Principles and guidelines may help, but there will not be any standard governing how practitioners apply these principles and guidelines in practice. Field training provides the learning experience of 'using knowledge' in practice, but teachers often prod their students to demonstrate the application of a therapy model successfully, rather than examining the phenomenon of 'using knowledge' itself. The disjunction between knowledge and practice actually mirrors the institutional arrangement that separates education from practice. As Eraut (1994) points out, the problem is structural.

In initial professional education, the pedagogic approaches needed for linking book knowledge with practice experience are almost impossible to implement when there is little continuity in the membership of the student groups. (p. 10)

Thus, beginners have to learn 'using knowledge' in practice on their own. All the participants had trouble in 'using knowledge' in practice. However, as the academic world can afford to insulate itself from the world of practice, teachers strip theories of the context that gives practical meaning to them in practice. They are promulgated as internally consistent systems of propositions. Therapy models are transmitted as a set of abstract ideas. The more creative teachers will supplement their instruction with case illustrations to bring out the concrete referents of the concepts, techniques and procedures in the model. Nonetheless, it is still restricted to cognitive learning. Students need to explore in their own practice the correspondence between theory and practice.

As Sally had learnt from experience, social workers need to "work out" a

theory in practice before they can use it in an intelligent way. Action learning is different from classroom learning; the meaning of theoretical ideas and how they are connected to professional action is interpreted in the context of action. We know an idea in the process of using it ('reflection-in-action') and after we have used it ('reflection-on-action'). This is the embodied way of knowing. Learning a therapy in the classroom will never be the same as 'working it out' in practice. However, there is little opportunity for students to try it out in practice, other than limited exposure in fieldwork placements, let alone to study their practice experience afterwards.

As initial social work education cannot help students to connect theories with practice, beginning social workers have to make the connection on their own. I think all beginning social workers will have to go through Sally's process to render theories relevant to and usable in practice. It takes both time and experience before they are able to bring abstract theoretical ideas to the practice level. Our participants succeeded in making the 'theory-practice' connection only after they had practised for many years. By then, they had changed the way they conceived of the relation between the two. It will be a tall order for social work teachers to accomplish in a few years what it may take a practitioner more than ten years to learn, but this is too important an issue for them to give up.

If the theories and therapy models taught in initial social work education are not usable knowledge, what is the point of teaching them to social work students? Michelle offered an interesting answer to this question. In her view, beginners need to follow a framework. Otherwise, they will not be able to cope with the demands of practice. "It is not until we have practiced long enough that we can finally...do it in an 'invisible' way...in an unconscious way...do it without realizing we have done it... not something we do in a deliberate way." If this is the case, it will suffice to teach students a single framework of practice to enable them to launch their beginning practice. Front-loading initial social work education with theories and therapy models taught in a superficial way defeats this purpose.

Pursuing this line of thinking further, we need to consider how we teach a framework of practice. Solution-focused Therapy became popular in Hong Kong a few years ago. I became familiar with it in the course of studying students'

fieldwork portfolios. I learned how to use ‘miracle questions’ to help clients set goals and take action. I learned how to use ‘scaling questions’ to gauge inter-session changes and how to give ‘compliments’ to reinforce a client’s change effort. I recall a student plotting a graph to show a client’s change by three points on a ten-point scale. The student had learned how to apply a therapy model in a ‘cookbook way’.

After reading her fieldwork portfolio, I offered the following comment

If social work practice is about applying a therapy model, if to use a therapy model is to follow a procedural guide, if to practise a therapy model competently is to reproduce the model in a ‘text-book case’ manner, then this student should deserve the top grade that the practice teacher has given her. However, I have one reservation. The student seemed to have learned nothing about practice, least of all about her own practice in her work with this client. I can only be assured that she has learned a therapy model as though she had read a case book.

This student could have learned more from her practice experience if the focus were on learning the nature of social work and what it was like to practise in the real world. She would pick up valuable learning by examining the problems she had encountered in ‘applying’ this therapy model rather than confirming it in post-action theoretical accounting. We will not be able to prepare students for practice in the real world if we encourage them to present a ‘text-book case’ of competent practice in applying a therapy model. Mary offered this insight—“therapies come and go”. What a student needs to learn is not a therapy model, but what it is like to practise with a therapy model as a point of reference and how its philosophical underpinning is expressed in the interactional process and the relationship dynamics in the give-and-take of help between two strangers.

Social work teachers have been heading towards a misplaced goal of transforming a novice into a competent social worker in a programme of initial social work. We learned from the stories that a social worker will have to go through a long learning process on the job before s/he can attain a semblance of competent practice. In addition, competence is not a state but a process of striving for excellence through continuous professional learning. Mary made this point—“learning, sharing with others, and learning again”. It is unrealistic to expect beginners to perform at a level on a par with experienced social workers. However, social work teachers have made the false claim that their students would be competent practitioners after initial social work education. This is a grossly inflated

claim for what such a programme can achieve. A programme of initial social work education cannot prepare students for practice—if that means competent practice.

Teaching the foundation of social work

The participants who held a more positive view saw initial social work education as providing beginners the ‘foundation’ for practice. How are we going to teach novices to interpret social work values and principles without the experiential base? We can teach anything context-free. The human mind is capable of learning abstract ideas, such as caring, acceptance, respect, non-judgmental, and the like. However, if we teach these values and principles in a context-free manner, students may write them off as ‘high-sounding’. That was how Yvonne felt as a student. Sally was not sure that she could help a client by listening and understanding alone. Vincent and his classmates laughed off Rogerian counselling as simple stuff. In initial social work education, social work values and principles assume meaning only in the professional discourse. Otherwise, they are only ideas. Students will not be able to ground these ideas in real-life practice until they have practised for some years.

Essential to our attempts to understand other people are the sensitivity and openness that our life experience may provide, not theoretical ideas (see Michelle’s, Sally’s, and Yvonne’s stories). Social work training failed to help young social work students straight from high school to develop these aspects. I could appreciate Michelle’s concern to get students to turn their attention from book knowledge to experience. It takes the weight of real-life experience in the practice world to humble (often young) social workers to accept that the world is far more complex than the ‘virtual reality’ their theories and therapy models project. Once they become more ‘realistic’, they will have more understanding and acceptance of their clients’ life-world. Humility makes social workers more accepting and respectful toward their clients. As Sally rightly noted, “It takes more than a single factor to account for why and how these people end up in such a state.”

Sally, Mary, and Yvonne arrived at the insight that understanding another person will always be difficult, but life experience helps. They conferred a profound

meaning on the notion of 'understanding'. Indeed, the awareness that we are not sure whether we really understand another person is hard to come by. It took a long process for them to re-discover the meaning of these values and principles rooted in their practice experience. That is why teaching the foundation of social work is difficult. We cannot lecture understanding. It will be easier to teach values and principles in a programme of continuing social work education because students have the practice experience to explore their meaning. In initial social work education, can social work teachers do better than simply supply their students with a language that sounds hollow in the beginning, and leave them to confer meaning on it later?

A proper aim for initial social work education

In the second interview, Michelle offered me this advice: "The training institutions need to ask: What is to be learned by students and what have they actually learned? To answer this question, we need to examine what we expect social work education to attain, and that depends on how we look at the nature of social work, the phenomenon of practice, and the epistemology of practice. We need to sort out these fundamental issues before we can reach an informed decision about the aims and the curriculum of initial social work education. In my view, the technical view of social work education is misleading, training students to perform in a social work role according to a normative standard of competence. Initial social work education would then be a training programme to equip a person with the skills to perform what s/he is trained to do in a competent manner. A professional helper is an expert. However, the stories suggest that what we do in a social work job may not be what we have been trained to do. There are two versions of social work—one found in the academic world and the other in the real world of practice. Thus, the connection between training and practice is not a 'one-to-one correspondence' relationship.

I think the diversity of social work activities across a variety of practice settings necessarily defy any attempt to establish a common benchmark for beginning practice. In other words, what it means by 'preparing students for

practice' is open to interpretation, which varies not only with practice settings but also with a person's orientation toward beginning practice. Thus, the priorities of beginners in taking up a social work job will vary. There is also the question of learner expectation. Beginners who are concerned about their performance and expect themselves to be competent in practice (e.g. Yvonne) will find initial social work education hardly adequate in preparing them for practice. Beginners who are less concerned about their performance will likely attend to other aspects of their experience in beginning practice. For instance, Flora engaged in reflective learning early on in the beginning year. The workplace culture did not emphasize the use of theories in practice nor effectiveness.

One thing in common among beginners is the need to learn on the job. Beginning practice is a period of intensive learning *inside* practice. By contrast, initial social work education is a period of intensive learning *outside* practice. Therefore the primary aim of initial social work education is more about professional socialization, that is, to acquire the worldview, the values and beliefs, and the professional discourse so as to enable students to pick up a social work job and become a new member of a community of social workers. The second aim is to show students what it is like to 'unpack' theories and concepts in making the practice of social work an intelligent action worthy of its claim of professional status. The third aim is to prepare students with the resources to learn and manage a novel task. Since consulting professional peers will be an important way for beginners to learn on the job, students need to be conversant with a 'language of practice' (Yinger, 1987) for framing their problems and communicating to professional peers. Another worthwhile goal for initial social work education is to develop students' aptitude to learn in and through their practice, both individually and collaboratively with professional peers. This will help them carry on learning from their practice experience throughout their professional life. How do we teach social work students so that they do not have to weather the long, oft time unrewarding process of re-visioning (re-inventing?) social work? My tentative answer is to give students access to philosophy and epistemology as well as social work narratives and stories, and to guide them through a process of inquiry into what they and their clients do and experience in social work. Probably, we should

reframe field training in social work education not as performance training but as a field-based inquiry that spans the entire period of social work education, and beyond.

A critique of continuing social work education

The participants approached continuing social work education either as a re-run of initial social work education or as advanced training in a specialized area. In this view, social work is a 'social technology'. Whilst there is advanced technology, it is hard to say what constitutes 'advanced social work'. Teaching practising social workers something new does not render their practice advanced. Solution-focused Therapy (the new 'technology' in the market) is not superior to Client-centred Therapy. No one idea is more advanced than another in social work. As Giddens (1987, cited in Howe, 1994:532) observes, "...sociological concepts, theories and findings 'spiral in and out' of social life...do not form an increasing body of knowledge." (p. 32)

Practitioners who pursue continuous professional education have concrete expectations of it. They have some ideas of what they want to learn. They may also have some ideas of how best to learn. Yvonne, Michelle, Sally, Jane, and Alan decided on a programme of continuing social work education as a major learning project in their professional life. They have had the lived experience of 'using' these theories and models (some if not all) in practice. They have had the experience of interpreting and expressing these ideas in action. They are no longer abstract ideas. Therefore, it makes little sense for social work teachers to treat these students as novices. There is no point in experienced practitioners going through initial social work education a second time.

However, several participants were disappointed to find in the programme of continuous social work education that either little was offered about practice (Jane) or they received a recycled curriculum of their initial social work education (Michelle and Yvonne). Does it mean that a programme of continuous social work education should teach something different from initial social work education, or something new to these practising social workers? Eraut (1994) cautions that an emphasis on the new in continuous professional education has the effect of subtly

devaluating both the prior experience of these advanced students and the status of the average practitioner's knowledge base. Continuous social work education often aims at teaching practitioners something new, another strand of separate, unintegrated professional knowledge that may not be relevant to what the practitioners are doing. It becomes a replica of initial social work education, not its curriculum, but in its educational philosophy. Practising social workers are turned into novices once again, and that means bracketing out their professional experience in the course of learning. This creates a divide between continuous professional learning in the programme and the professional work they have been doing, hence rendered their learning in the programme irrelevant to their work and defeated the purpose of continuous social work education (Eraut, 1994).

Eraut approaches the issue of what constitutes the proper content of continuous professional education from two directions. First, he questions the connection between continuous professional education (CPE) and the work experience of practitioners. Flora's experience in pursuing in-service training exemplifies the issue raised here. In some courses, the content was so unrelated to her work experience as to be of little value. In other courses, the content was too proximal to her workplace experience so she felt it was just repeating workplace conversations. How do we draw the line between new learning and workplace experience? In Eraut's view, CPE should focus on helping practitioners to create new knowledge arising from distillation of personal experience, the latter is supported by continuous professional development activities.

Second, he frames the issue in the context of life-long professional learning. Both initial professional education (IPE) and CPE are part of life-long professional learning. Most participants in this study embraced the value of life-long professional learning for their professional growth. If IPE is conceived as the starting point, there is no point in overloading the syllabus "regardless of students' ability to digest it and use it", and I would add—our ability to teach it. As he notes, "the frontloading of theory is extremely inefficient" and has the undesirable effect of "maximizing the separation of theory and practice". The stories provide evidence for his concern and suggest that IPE is indeed only the starting point of a long process of professional learning. This opens up space for re-thinking initial social

work education. What is its role in the 'learning career' of social workers? What level of capability and competence should beginners possess at the exit point? What should be the level of beginning competence to qualify a person to practise? In a less 'crowded' curriculum, what should be included and what should be taken out?

For CPE to be an integral part of life-long professional learning, the control of its curriculum and how it is taught should not be solely in the hands of academic social workers. They will tend to re-cycle the curricula philosophy of IPE. Academic social workers may be too far removed from the practice world as to be able to make CPE responsive to the learning needs of practising social workers. Furthermore, they will perpetuate the separation of theory and practice and the privileged status of theoretical knowledge in relation to the practice knowledge of practitioners. In what follows, I wish to explore a philosophy for continuous social work education.

A philosophy for continuous social work education

In initial social work education in Hong Kong, most students will have little idea of what social work is. They think they need to acquire some professional knowledge and skills before they are qualified to become a social worker. They will have little idea of the curriculum, and least of all the philosophy behind it. They are passive learners waiting to be trained. A programme of continuous social work education should be sharply different. The students are not novices. Pursuing CPE is a major decision in their professional life because it entails substantial investment of time and effort, particularly for women social workers with multiple life roles. They enter the programme with some notions about social work in real life practice and some concrete ideas of what they want to learn. They have opinions about the curriculum. They bring their professional biography into the learning situation. We teachers cannot disregard the learners' professional experience. If we teach practising social workers something new, we are doing what initial social work education has done. It is advanced training in the sense that there is something new, but it is not continuous education because it has nothing to do with their professional experience. Continuous education is, at its core, a continuation of what

they have learned in practice.

CPE is not about refreshing memory or re-learning what has not been learned the first time even if we treat it as a refresher course. Professional education is not about the retention of inert knowledge. It is about learning to practise. The knowledge that practitioners use in practice is not inert knowledge. Anything covered previously may still be profitably pursued in the context of their professional experience to contribute to their professional development. We re-visit old ideas in the spirit of re-visioning them, now that they are illuminated by practice experience.

In any programme of continuous social work education, there should be a clear statement of two important aspects of the programme philosophy. First, there should be an articulation of the process of professional development and how the programme will fit into the process. Second, there should be an articulation of the role of learners' professional experience in the teaching-learning process. Yvonne's account of her learning experience in a programme of continuous social work education is a negative example. It re-cycled not only the curriculum content of initial social work education but also the pedagogic approach. There was no room for examining the counselling experience that some of the students would have acquired in their social work jobs. This is an example of the structural problem of locating continuous social work education in higher education. Academic social workers design a programme based on what they know and what they think social workers need to know. They operate on the assumed learning needs of their students. However, there is a split between academic social workers and frontline social workers in their epistemological standpoint. The former values theories, but the latter values practical knowledge.

Mary's comment on her educational experience is illuminating. She had learnt theories. "So what? I can't figure out what to do!" Practitioners make decisions and judgement on 'what to do', the sort of minutiae routinely omitted in social work curriculum. However, this is precisely the province of in-service training courses. Many family service participants found these in-service training courses helpful in advancing their practice. They studied the theory of a therapy model and the

practise of it simultaneously. They studied their practice (in tapes) alongside trainers and other experienced practitioners. They could feed back their learning experience to their practice, and find out what the result was. Mary learned the 'good child, bad child' script and used it to help a distressed mother to see the 'exception' in Brief Therapy. This script was of application value, and she could assimilate it into her practice repertoire because she had the opportunity to try it out in practice. Practitioners look for this kind of learning and pedagogic approach in a programme of continuous social work education. Responding to this kind of learning needs will also reinforce the technical-rational view of practice.

Educating for continuous professional learning—A proposal

Heeding Michael Eraut's idea of grounding IPE and CPE as part of a life-long professional learning project, and noting that social workers (in this study) pursue continuous professional learning to ward off stagnation and keep their sense of professionalism alive in their social work career, we should approach continuous social work education as self-education for professional learning. Whilst academic social workers have a larger role to play in initial social work education, individual practitioners should play a major role in the control and organization of continuous social work education and professional development (CPD). Of course, there is little sign as yet of this vision being realized because it will require not only ideological change in our conception of knowledge and education for social workers, but will also imply a re-alignment of the power relationship between academic social workers and practitioners. We need a starting point for change; holding a vision and examining it is the starting point.

Social workers begin to pursue serious learning of immediate practical value once they embark on their social work career. In this study, all the participants began to learn (and re-learn) social work on the job, driven by their need to cope with the demands of practice. Some learned a social work different from that which they had learned in initial social work education. Others learned more theories and therapy models in their attempts to improve their practice. Each person pursued her/his learning activities with little idea of what these activities would lead to and

how they could be helpful to practice. Almost invariably, such learning activities did not form part of a programme of life-long professional learning, and institutional support was no more than allowing time off to attend courses. A more active involvement of employing agencies in supporting continuous professional learning of their social workers, particularly beginners, is desirable since professional learning is always connected to work-based learning. Curiously, social work agencies still stick to the antiquated practice of individual supervision to meet the learning needs of practitioners. However, frontline supervisors are too busy with new initiatives in management practice these days to be asked to that. They can hardly afford the time to perform this function. Furthermore, they will increasingly be unsuited to perform this function after being out of 'first-hand' direct practice for years. Alan, Iris, Venus, and Yvonne all made this point.

Supporting practitioners in their pursuit of continuous professional learning serves the interest of a social work agency, especially at a time when new managerialism has turned social work into a competitive market. When performance is the value and resource allocation is performance-driven, the excellence of its practitioners is the key to agency survival and development. Imposing performance-goals will not go very far since performance has less to do with effort and time but more with the competence of individual practitioners. One thing that social work managers should manage is the institutional support given to individual practitioners in pursuing continuous professional learning. In this study, I came upon the idea of an in-house study group (the Brief Therapy team) that featured prominently in the professional lives of Yvonne, Michelle, and Mary. They first initiated it as an informal study group. Later on, their employing agency institutionalized it as a formal arrangement to support the application of a therapy model in practice. This is a good example of managing for continuous professional learning. Learning activities were self-directed by the members and were related to their work. Senior members (in terms of practice experience) served as mentors to junior members. They could have access to each other's practice through taped practice sessions, live supervision, and co-practice. They conducted workshops to disseminate their learning to other colleagues and published their practice knowledge. This is an exemplar of good institutional support.

I came upon the idea of a 'practitioner inquiry group' (McLeod, 1999) in the second interview with Sally. A group of practitioners formed a collaborative learning community to study their practice and explore new ideas relevant to their practice. Every member served as a 'trainer' for other members. The 'trainer-trainee' hierarchy did not exist. Learning was self-directed and geared toward their learning interests, and their learning interests were always related to their experience in practice. This is the kind of continuous professional development that practitioners can pursue on their own initiative, with their own resources, and at their own pace. The advantage of this arrangement is that it goes beyond the organizational boundary and hence the control of social work managers. This is a significant advantage for two reasons. First, continuous professional learning is grounded in a collective sense of professionalism, not the narrow confines of organizational advancement of individual agencies. Thus, knowledge and expertise becomes a public asset of the professional community. In a competitive social work market, agency self-interest will inhibit the flow of knowledge and expertise among practitioners. Second, there is a social dimension to individual practice and practice knowledge; a social work office is a discourse community and houses a tradition of practice. Members of a 'practitioner inquiry group' can draw on a larger pool of discourse and benefit from 'cross-breeding' of practice.

Both agency-based study groups and practitioner-based inquiry groups share one thing in common—practice is the site of professional learning and what is learned will be valuable when applied by practitioners. They support individual efforts to pursue continuous professional learning. What is the role of continuous social work education? Continuous professional learning is no substitute for continuous social work education in providing the academic credentials for social workers to move to a career in social work education. Higher education still holds the institutional power to confer academic qualifications that constitute the basis for social work's claim to professional status. But continuous social work education will remain a poor response to the learning needs of practitioners unless academic social workers are prepared to give up their power to determine what practitioners need to learn. Relinquishing this power will imply a greater role for social work agencies and their practitioners to determine learning needs, programme objectives,

and the structural connection between education and practice, and how learning is to be pursued. Academic social workers function in this re-aligned relationship as experts in supporting practitioners to conduct practice-based inquiry individually or in groups, and as resource-persons in linking practitioners to intellectual resources. They are not trainers in performing these functions. There is a 'symbiotic relationship'. Whilst academic teachers perform their functional roles, they also learn from practitioners not only their practice knowledge but also how to render discourse resource relevant to practice.

If we pursue this line of thinking, we are going to see programmes of continuous social work education jointly designed by individual agencies, a consortium of agencies specialized in a particular field, or the practice community as a whole. We are going to see academic social workers teaching and learning in agencies instead of teaching in universities. We are going to see academic social workers working in collaborative projects with groups of practitioners. When that day comes, there will be an integration of education and practice, and a permeable boundary between the academic world and the practice world.

Postscript

"If you knew when you began a book what you would say at the end, do you think you would have the courage to write it?... The game is worthwhile insofar as we don't know what will be the end." (Foucault, cited in *The Lives of Michel Foucault*, by David Macey, 1993, p. xiv)

I am now towards the end of writing this thesis. I am now reaching the end of the research journey. All along, I have tried to be alert lest I would say what I could have said in the beginning of the study. What I say at the end are things I have learned in the research process, not only about the object of the inquiry but also about researching and writing research.

"Is it a piece of good research work?" My audiences asked me.

Yes, it is a good piece of work. I did not start straight out with a research idea and carry it through. I have examined it, reflected on it, written about it in conference papers, and finally revised it. This is the first lesson I learned: Asking a good question is better than giving a good answer to a poor question.

What is it like for social workers to learn and change in their professional life? This is a good question. The research participants assured me of this. They had never thought about it, although they are living it. When I put this question to them, they began to appreciate the experience of telling their professional biography. It is a new experience, an affirmative one. It restores meaning and purpose to being a social worker, even more so in times of threat and uncertainty which many social workers are experiencing in Hong Kong.

Talking with others about our experience induces us to reflect and reconsider our understanding of past experience and practice, and to look ahead into the future. The research participants gave back a story to themselves, a story of learning and change to become a better social worker. I am sure they have found the experience liberating.

For my part, listening to their stories rejuvenated my optimism. Social workers will re-vitalise social work. They are not only doing social work, they are also authoring it. They uncover its normative basis, re-affirm it, and give expression to it in their practice. They began their social work career trying to use theories in their practice. They ended up finding a new epistemology for practice and created their own

knowledge in practice.

“How can you be sure about the validity of what you found?” This is a fair question. A researcher is obliged to convince the audiences of this.

Ask me to name one strength of this study, and I would say reflexivity. It is always difficult for a researcher to remain involved in the research process and yet stay above it at the same time. I have taken this to heart. I questioned myself at every stage of the process, asking how I framed the study, how I prepared the research participants, how I set up the interviews, how I performed my part as the researcher/interviewer, how I listened, how I transcribed the taped interviews, how I converted the interview texts to stories, how I made sense of the stories, how I spoke their voices and presented mine. In every step of the research process, I disciplined my research self against intruding too much whilst trying to be there. Writing my self into the research is a strategy to sensitise myself to my presence in the research. I would feel very bad if, at the end of the inquiry, I say what I would have said all along even if I had not carried out the study.

Being reflexive may not be a convincing answer to some of the audiences. They would reply, “Yes, you have been reflexive. Nonetheless, we still question whether what you found is valid.”

They are right to persist. This is a thorny question. Once I declared my epistemological position as being in the social constructionist camp, I could not side-step this question. If the world was a constructed one, validity became both a non-issue as well as a problematic issue. It is a non-issue if, validity means that all other accounts of the world are invalid. Social constructionism embraces multiple realities. If however there were multiple realities, why would they accept my version?

This is an issue of trustworthiness. Why do they believe in what I write? I have tried to grapple with this issue ever since I started to convert the interview texts to stories. I am confident that the transcribed interview texts are dependable representations of the interview interactions. However, downsizing it to one-tenth of the original length (because of the word limit of the dissertation) and in a different textual style (story) runs the risk of subtly altering the interviewee’s voice. I have adopted a tedious procedure to ensure that the essence of the interview narrative would not be washed away—gradual reduction of the interview text through a

number of interim versions, each time checking whether the storyline remained intact and the most significant events/disclosures were there. In short, I have tried to ensure that the final story is truthful to how I understand the interviewee's interview narrative.

Writing stories is a representational task. Drawing out what I have learned from these stories is a matter of interpretation and analysis. It might be self-evident to conclude that beginning practice had been a period of survival to Yvonne. She had described at great length the difficult experience she had in the beginning years. However, others might be less explicit. In either case, my principle is to make sure it is grounded and supportable. Interpretation must begin from narrative data. If I were not sure that the narrative data in the story were sufficiently strong to warrant an interpretation, I would return to the original interview text to look for evidence.

Putting together the thematic chapters involves synthesizing the stories, connecting to the literature, and bringing in my voice. There is always a tension between the individual and the collective, highlighting similarities whilst keeping diversity in sight. There is always the risk of making selective use of narrative data to make a point or refute another. Again, reflexivity helps but is not sufficient. I have heeded the advice found in methodological texts that the thematic discussion should follow a trail of evidence originated from the interview texts. This is the best that I can do to justify myself telling my audiences that what I have learnt from these stories is plausible. I found some comfort in noting Denzin & Lincoln's (1994) opinion: "The process of analysis, evaluation, and interpretation are...always emergent, unpredictable, and unfinished." (p. 479) In the realm of human meaning, we cannot find the kind of proof required for a law-like phenomenon.

Accepting a postmodern version of validity, my audience questioned if what I found in this study is worth finding. "Would this world miss something of value had you not carried out this study?"

This is a value question. I am sure about the value of the study to me. How could it be otherwise? I have spent so much time on it. It has become part of my professional life. I have assimilated my research experience into my teaching, and what I teach my students these days is very different from what I used to teach before embarking on this study. What about other people? Will they find this study of value to them? I offer a simple answer: This study adds to the professional discourse things new, and there are a lot of new things. For instance, I recall having

asked myself what the research participants would teach my students. Obliquely, I was saying that practitioners had a different sense of what would make a good curriculum for the professional preparation of social workers. They know the field. They will have useful things to say about preparing students for practice.

Whether or not this study will add new things to the professional discourse depends very much on its visibility and whether it can find its place in the professional landscape. It means a lot more to do on my part after the study.

Now, it is the time of confession. Professor Parsloe advised me to tell my audiences the shortcomings of this study. There are some, and I do see the point of bring them to the foreground at the end of the study. Perhaps someone will come along to extend or refine this study. It will also help my audiences to critique the study. Research criticism helps to advance social work scholarship.

If I could return to the past and launch the study again, I would have done it (more) properly—and this would mean bracketing out all sorts of constraints in the first place. Including more participants will help. I might have talked to a group of social workers who were exceptionally self-driven to become a good social worker. I wonder what the result would be if I had used the ‘snow-ball’ strategy to find research participants. It would be worthwhile also to include social workers working in practice settings other than the family service setting. I decided to keep the study focused on practitioners working in the family service setting at the time I planned the study. Now that I realize the significance of setting-variations in shaping beginning practice, I see the value of factoring in the ‘setting variable’. By far, the change that I would like to see most is to interview the family service participants two or three times more. I would then have a much better grasp of the process of change and a closer relationship with them. Ideally speaking, I would like to make the study a participatory inquiry. I have tried this with several research participants, but their level of involvement was not as high as I would like it to be. Social workers are too busy these days to collaborate in a research project, even if it were a self-inquiry. Perhaps I could have set up two or three group sessions to discuss with them what I had learned from their stories. This would provide a friendlier alternative for the participants to take a greater share in authoring the study. However, I couldn’t manage to do this. There were many things competing for my time. This is the reality of doing a Ph.D. study whilst working full-time in a demanding job and being a husband-father at the same time.

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