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Forming a new and unexpected relationship through digital technologies

Article

Forming a new and unexpected relationship through digital technologies: Lessons for child and family social work

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Abstract

This article is not a research paper in the conventional sense. Instead, it is a reflexive account of the building of a relationship which _would_ not have happened without the existence of digital technologies and _might_ not have happened but for the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. It was through reading a digitised resource (an online PhD thesis) in the first UK 'lockdown' that Bob, now a semi-retired academic in the field of adult and organisational learning, began to reappraise his upbringing in a children's home in Scotland. Meanwhile, it was in getting to know Bob (through emails and Zoom meetings) and by accessing Bob's retrospectively digitised case record that Viv, the author of the PhD thesis and now a semi-retired social work academic, was stimulated to revisit her early research from a fresh perspective. We argue that our real-life example, seren-dipitous and unique as it undoubtedly is, demonstrates the democratising potential of the digital transformation that is currently being played out in child and family social work. Furthermore, it seems likely that digital technologies will continue to bring new and unexpected opportunities for forming such relationships in the future.

Plain language summary

In this article, two older academics (one from social work and the other from management learning) introduce their meeting online during the Covid-19 pandemic and the relationship they

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have been building since then, from the very different perspectives of a social work researcher and a former resident of a children's home in Edinburgh in the 1940s and 50s. Bob and Viv describe coming together as an opportunity for shared learning, and they suggest that child and family social workers should be ready for, and welcome, such opportunities.

Introduction

Over the last 20 years or so, there has been a sea change in attitudes towards knowledge. Questions such as 'What is knowledge?', 'To whom does it belong?' and 'Who has the right to access it?' have been transformed by the development of digital technologies that have created new ways of producing and using knowledge, whether this is 'born digital', digitised or 'big data'. How far this can be seen as a transformation from an 'information society' to a 'knowledge society' is uncertain. Wessels and colleagues argue that it is 'the actions of a network of actors who together generate an open data movement' (2017: 14). Transformation is therefore not just about new technologies; it is about the people who use them. Digital technologies have had a profound impact on both academic and professional practice in child and family social work, and on the relationship between the two. At the same time, digital technologies have had a profound impact on those who use them and on the relationships that we form with each other. This, then, is the context within which the reflexive discussion that follows is located, as we explore one instance of what happened when academic and professional practice and two 'actors' from very different backgrounds came together through the mechanism of digital technologies.

We begin by briefly outlining the changing nature of access to data within university and childcare/social work contexts. We then present the first encounter (the email that was sent and its response), before introducing the two individuals at the heart of this story. The main body of the article explores our shared and overlapping journeys over the last year and a bit, arguing that our contact has been a source of mutual learning and reappraisal, which has been positive for both of us. Finally, we turn our attention to what this story might mean for others, particularly those working in child and family social work and those who have lived or are currently living 'in care' of one kind or another. Whilst we do not expect our experience to be either representative or generalisable (see Noble and Smith, 2015), we hope that it may provide a useful example of what is possible to others working and experiencing child and family social work.

Before getting into the substance of the article proper, we would like to share our misgivings about some of the terminology that has been commonplace in the past and present literature and practice of child and family social work. The terms 'care', being 'care-experienced', being a 'client', a 'service user' or even an 'expert by experience' are all problematic, carrying with them stigmatising and objectifying notions that may minimise the reality that everyone is different and that there are vast divergences in experience between people with differing genders, classes, sexualities, ages, personal biographies and so on. Researchers have written extensively about this (for example, Beresford, 2005;

McLaughlin, 2009; Skoura-Kirk, 2022). We can only reiterate what has been said already, whilst also drawing attention to the reality that the term 'care-experienced adult', although now routinely used within the social work literature, is not one that Bob had ever heard, in spite of having grown up in a children's home. When he first came across the phrase in the course of our collaboration on this paper, his reaction was one of some bemusement and resistance, and so we have chosen to use this only when no other term will suffice.

Knowledge and data: The academic and practice context

In the past, PhD theses sat on dusty university library shelves and were read, at most, by six people: the supervisor(s), the examiners, the student and (possibly) a proofreader, who may have been a partner or close friend and was often thanked in the 'Acknowledgements' at the start of the thesis. PhD theses were, in effect, available only to a few, despite being potentially valuable sources of knowledge and new ideas. Graduates were encouraged to write articles from their theses as a way of increasing visibility and, of course, to add to their record of publication. A relatively small number of people also turned their theses into a monograph, which, again, would be accessible only to a small percentage of the population, because of the high price tag that such publications incur.

Social work case records were also, for very different reasons, only accessible to a small number of people. Notions of confidentiality and best professional practice meant that the only people to have regular and easy access to these records were the people who had written them, that is, the social workers and their managers. Meanwhile, the subjects of the records, whatever their age, could not expect to see or read what had been written about them and may even have remained unaware that they were being kept in the first place. When the Data Protection Act was first passed in 1984 (subsequently revised in 1988), it confirmed the principle that although subject access should be the norm, exemptions could be made if such access was 'likely to prejudice the carrying out of social work' (Braye, Corby and Mills, 1988: 50). As a consequence, client records remained a relatively closed book, essentially out of reach of service users.

In recent years, university libraries have devoted considerable resources to digitising their PhD thesis collections. There have been practical reasons for this, to do with saving money and space within library buildings (see Weisser and Walker, 1997), but the gains have gone far beyond this as information has become more accessible and easier to search. Recent research confirms this assertion. Using their own institution as a case study in which to interrogate the impact of the digitisation of theses, Bennet and Flanagan (2016) found that not only was there higher traffic to digital theses, having a digital thesis collection also enhanced the reputation of the university. The decision by universities to digitise their thesis collections should not, however, only be seen as being about pragmatics or even reputation. It must be understood as part of the wider political and philosophical agenda that has sought, over the last 20 years or so, to transform public services, including universities, with a new attention to the principle of knowledge *exchange* (as an alternative to knowledge *transfer*) and with it, user participation (see Gallagher et al., 2012; Nutley, Walter and Davies, 2007; Smith et al., 2012). Making theses available online thus potentially creates conditions that allow for knowledge exchange – and indeed, knowledge co-creation – to take place through increased user participation.

A very different set of policy drivers has forced the social work profession to allow greater access to its social work and childcare records. Goddard, Murray and Dubcalf (2013) point

out that before the children's rights movement that culminated in the passing of the Children Act 1989 in the UK and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, there was very little sharing of file information with children in care. 'Such files', they assert, 'served a bureaucratic function and any usefulness for the adult care leaver was an unintentional by-product' (Goddard, Murray and Dubcalf, 2013: 760). It is worth reflecting further on this. While the Access to Personal Files Act 1987 and the Access to Personal Files (Social Services) Regulations 1989 allowed individuals to access their records in local authority manual files, this legislation was not retrospective, meaning that earlier records could not be accessed. Similarly, while all care leavers were entitled to have a copy of their records under the Data Protection Act 1998, exclusions remained, and the primary goal was, as stated, the *protection* of data, not *access* to data. Information referring to 'third parties' could not be released without permission and, as a result, large sections of files were subject to a process known as 'redaction'. As Goddard and colleagues explain:

> Since such information most frequently refers to other family members, a good deal of information that may be relevant to one's sense of identity cannot be released without the permission of the individuals concerned. As a result, care leavers frequently receive files with documents removed, names deleted and large sections of text removed or rendered illegible. Moreover, a good deal of work goes into this process of redaction and it can lead to significant delays in files being accessed. (Goddard, Murray and Dubcalf, 2013: 763)

Redaction, however, went further than this. Not only were family members' names removed, so were those of other professionals and stakeholders. This is still the position in the UK today. The Data Protection Act 2018 affirms that those collecting personal data must ensure that the information is used fairly, lawfully and, importantly for our discussion, transparently. Increasing numbers of care-experienced children and adults are now seeking access to their current and historical case records, just as ever-larger numbers of researchers are seeking to make sense of so-called 'administrative data' for evaluating the impact of child welfare interventions (see Green et al., 2015). None of this, however, takes away from the absences in the case files: the people whose names have been removed from the records and the people whose voices were never recorded in the first place, as well as the countless files that were lost or destroyed along the way. Nor does it address to any degree the pressing issue of justice and the need to find ways of redressing past wrongs, as outlined in recent research on the experiences of young people in the New South Wales care system (Greenwood, Mansour and Winnett, 2019).

Against this background, we now go on to outline our first online encounter with each other in what was to become a co-authoring relationship for this article.

The first contact

On Sunday 3 October 2021, the following email was sent:

> Dear Professor Cree
> As reputedly the first child to be taken into care at Edzell Lodge Children's Home (before it was officially opened), I am just reading your 1992 doctoral thesis with fascination. It's wonderful to

have this account, which prompts a welter of insights, recollections, memories, emotions, under-standings and reframings.

In later adult life, I have been in very occasional touch with what is now Birthlink, firstly to gain access to my social work records – once they became available, and once I'd overcome any ambivalence – in a belated attempt to try to understand the changing circumstances of my life's trajectory in the context of wider social and economic developments, and now in a belated attempt to honour and give voice to my mother's experiences.

[…]

I realise that this is a shot in the dark, and whether or not we can meet, I'd like to thank you for the gift that your work represents to me.

Kind regards

Bob MacKenzie (or 'Bobby', as I'm known in the records)
Visiting Professor, University of Chichester Business School

This reply was sent the same day:

Dear Bob (if I may call you this?)

It is lovely to hear from you. I would never have expected that 30 years after I was working on my PhD you would get in touch! I am humbled that you found my PhD of interest – and of value to your own story.

I'd love to hear more. […] I wonder if we might have a conversation on Zoom? Although I do still visit Edinburgh from time to time, I don't think our dates are going to work this time. […]

I look forward to hearing from you again. My mobile number is xxx if you'd like to give me a call – or please email me again – either is fine.

Very best wishes from Viv (and please call me Viv!)

Viviene E Cree
Emerita Professor of Social Work Studies, University of Edinburgh

Since those first emails were exchanged, Bob and Viv have met via the video communications platform, Zoom, on six occasions and in person once, a few months before this article was first drafted. Intermittently, we have also continued to exchange notes, comments and further drafts via email. We also, in a deliberate use of 'old-school' technology, sent each other a biographical letter about ourselves. Our relationship is, therefore, in current parlance, a 'hybrid' one: not fully digital but nonetheless heavily reliant on digital technologies. Writing about the changes wrought by Covid-19 on day-to-day childcare practice, Ferguson, Kelly and Pink acknowledge 'the creative innovations' that had to take place, as 'hybrid digital and in-person casework and talking interviews, for instance, became routine' (2021: 21). We were not able to meet in person until after 'lockdown' had been lifted, so cannot attest to the value of 'walking and talking' in this relationship. Nevertheless, we are well aware of the impact of 'seeing' each other online and listening back to the digital recordings of our discussions; this virtual contact has deepened our relationship in ways that would have been unlikely in a conventional research interview. But let us now start at the beginning: who are Bob and Viv, what made this encounter happen and what has unfolded since then? To explain, we reproduce excerpts from the biographical notes that we agreed to share with each other soon after we first 'met' online.

Introducing Bob

I was born in 1944 in what would now be referred to as a slum tenement in Fountainbridge, Edinburgh. My mother – a single parent (a 'fallen woman' in those days) – was already 'known' to the then Guild of Service for Women (since known first as Family Care and now Birthlink, having undergone several shifts of focus as detailed in Viv's doctoral study; Cree, 1993). After a precarious nomadic existence for mother and child, I became, at the age of two years and 10 months, the first resident of the agency's children's home in the leafy area of Inverleith Terrace (the Edzell Lodge of the email). Thereafter, I experienced my child-hood as something of a rollercoaster, being variously acutely aware both of being held and nurtured, and also of feeling ashamed and patronised, on behalf of both my mother and myself as recipients of well-meaning charity and scrutiny. I was also divided in my loyalties and attachment to my birth mother and the matron, my proxy mother.

I went on to graduate in History Honours from Edinburgh University in the 1960s, and became part of the latter-day Scottish diaspora, taking up an overseas development post on behalf of the British Government in East Africa. I have remained an expatriate ever since. My work has spanned UK and international settings within the public, private, voluntary and higher education sectors. My career has straddled the spaces between academia and the world of work, and I am director of an educational charity (the Association for Management Education and Development [AMED]), where I actively support communities of writing practice.

I did not gain access to my (pre-digital) records until later adult life. It was then a revelation when I discovered and obtained a digital copy of Viv's doctoral study (Cree, 1993) of the social work agency that took responsibility for my care as a child and young adult, giving me greater insight into the contemporary context and influences that shaped my formative experiences and subsequent practice. Our contact since then, in the form of a co-inquiry, has helped me to review those first 20 or so years of my life and to understand more clearly the forces that shaped the practice of those involved with the social work agency that was primarily responsible for my upbringing.

Introducing Viv

I was born in 1954 in Broughty Ferry, Dundee, the middle child of three girls. I was the first in my family to go to university and later went on to become a youth and community worker and then a social worker, where I worked predominantly with girls and young women. One of these jobs was at a voluntary social work agency known then as Family Care (and today as Birthlink), where my role was to support single parents and pregnant women, some of whom had terminations while others opted to give their babies up for adoption. I also, with another social worker in the mid-1980s, set up a community resource for women and children in Muirhouse, a council housing estate on the northern edge of Edinburgh, which became notorious soon after as the setting for the cult film, *Trainspotting*.

Family Care, I discovered, had a fascinating history, and it was this that became the topic of my PhD, begun soon after completing an Open University degree in sociology. The agency had begun in 1911 as the National Vigilance Association (Eastern Division), before becoming the Guild of Service for Women and, by the early 1980s, Family Care. The central thread of my PhD was social work's changing discourse and to explore this, I examined and interviewed some 80 former and current social workers and committee

members. I chose not to interview service users, because my focus was on the motivations and justifications of the staff (paid and unpaid). My PhD was completed in November 1992 (Cree, 1993); I had started work as a lecturer in social work at the University of Edinburgh the previous month. I then stayed at the university, occupying various posts and positions, until retiring from full-time work at the end of 2018.

When Bob's email popped into my inbox, I was curious, interested and, above all, delighted. I welcomed the opportunity to revisit questions that I had asked of myself – and of social work – throughout my career. If I am honest, I had often wondered if I should have made a different decision all those years before about not speaking to 'experts by experience'. This was my chance to do something about it.

Forming a relationship

Following the email correspondence, Bob and Viv first met on Zoom on 2 November 2021. We were both nervous, but excited. How should we present to each other? Would we like one another? Would this be a one-off meeting or the beginning of something else? What did we both want from this encounter? What were we trying to do here? This last question has remained with us throughout the period of our contact and is central to our relationship.

At our first meeting, we began by introducing ourselves. Bob told the story of his childhood and also of his relationship with the agency and, more specifically, with his case file. He had first accessed his records in the early 1990s, at a time when they had not been redacted but had been microfiched, in some instances poorly, and he had been given copies of records, many of which were now faded and difficult to read. After our first email correspondence, he visited Birthlink again and met a social worker who went through a redacted case file with him. Viv, for her part, said that she had kept a folder of her PhD notes, had gone to the box file in which it was stored and found, to her great surprise, letters to and from Bob dated May 1991, in which Bob expressed interest in her research and Viv explained why she was not interviewing ex-clients of the service. What was noteworthy was that neither Bob nor Viv remembered this communication from 30 years ago. As we reflected on this further, we recognised that there were important messages here about the fallibility of memory and also, perhaps more significantly, about synchronicity, accessibility and timing. Whilst our first communication had come to a quick ending, we were *now* both open to the possibilities that it brought all these years later, perhaps because digital technologies made communication so much easier, perhaps because of Covid-19 and the impact of 'lockdown' and perhaps also because we were both at a reflective time of our lives, in our older years and approaching and embracing retirement (see Jackson, 2021).

From that point on, we set about investigating ourselves and our relationship; we called this a form of collective ethnography (see Ellis, Adams and Bochner, 2011; Ellis and Rawicki, 2013). We began by writing an autobiographical story for each other, in which we outlined what we thought we were bringing to the mutual project and also what our proudest achievements were in our lives. Bob subsequently shared his DPhil thesis, completed in 2005 (MacKenzie, 2005), and parts of his case file; he also gave permission for Viv to access the entire (redacted) file from Birthlink. Bob and Viv met on Zoom with a former colleague of Viv's who had worked for some years for Birthlink; he had written recently about case files (Clapton, 2021) and agreed to act as a 'critical friend' (MacKenzie, 2015) to us, if needed. At Bob's request, Viv conducted genealogical research in order to give him

more information about his mother's family background; she also collected Bob's case file and read through it carefully. Bob and Viv sent regular emails to each other and met once a month or so to discuss our thoughts and insights. We also shared a vast amount of what we saw as relevant literature with each other: books and articles about unmarried mothers, ethnographic research, childcare, reflexivity. We found we had much in common, in spite of our different backgrounds. We met in the space that is our mutual respect for each other, our shared love of learning and our deep-seated wish to make sense of things (see Yeo and Lewis, 2019).

We also met once in person over a prolonged coffee in a quiet Edinburgh café. Viv had booked a room at the university in order to give us maximum privacy, but there was industrial action that day and neither of us wished to cross a picket line. The café worked well, however, and the informal setting probably helped us to feel less shy of one another. It may also have helped to mitigate any issues of power (which we return to in the Discussion section). The encounter was warm and friendly, as all our online meetings have been. Bob suggested that we record the conversation (we were clear that this was *not* an interview) and we each did so on our own mobile phones. Much of our time together was taken up with preparation for this article, as we agreed its focus and explored what needed to be included as well as what should be left for another article, as yet to be decided. We left the meeting with a clear writing plan and the realisation that while we did not have all the answers, there was nevertheless something useful for both of us (and, we hoped, for the wider child and family social work community) in the reappraisal that our developing relationship was making possible.

Discussion

So, what have we learned? The answer to this question has changed over time as we have become less concerned with the traces of the past (the PhD thesis and the case file) and more concerned with the realities of the present (that is, our shared relationship). We are fully aware that documents such as theses and case files raise a mass of issues, in terms of their use of language, incompleteness, contradictory information, inaccuracies, biases and omissions (see Clapton, 2021; Hayes and Devaney, 2004; Horrocks and Goddard, 2006; Shaw and Holland, 2017). But this was not and is not our central preoccupation. Instead, we are more interested in each other and our relationship and in exploring the key questions: what *is* this relationship? Why *now*? And finally, what part did (and do) *digital technologies* play in this developing relationship?

What is this relationship?

It is probably easiest to start by stating what our relationship is *not*. We were clear from the outset that ours was not a professional 'social worker–client' relationship, and nor was it 'therapy' in any intentional sense. Viv was not there to 'counsel' Bob, and for his part, Bob was not there to give Viv 'absolution' for any or all of the past ills of social work. But what also became apparent over time was that this was not a conventional 'qualitative researcher–informant' relationship either. Viv was not the interviewer, just as Bob was not the interviewee. Instead, this has been (and still is) a project of co-inquiry (see Heron and Reason, 2001; Napan et al., 2018), in which we are both investigators and learners at the same time.

Our relationship, as far as is ever possible, is a democratic, equal one, where the focus is on learning from each other.

The words, 'as far as is ever possible', are critical in this context. It should not be assumed that we have not had to confront issues of identities and power. On the contrary, such issues have remained central to our ongoing discussions, as a consequence of the differences that we inevitably carry from our past lives and careers and thanks to our positioning in terms of age, gender and class (Hill Collins, 2015). As a former social worker, Viv inevitably held power over Bob, a former 'client', who still carried with him ideas of shame and guilt from his past life in care. Bob, for his part, held power over Viv by virtue of his age and gender as an older man and also by his status as an 'expert by experience', hence someone whose views commanded respect. Most of the time in our online meetings and correspondence, we have functioned as two semi-retired academics, albeit from different disciplinary backgrounds (adult learning/business studies/management and sociology/community education/social work respectively). But more insidious traces of power, past and present, undoubtedly remain and, in common with the values of relationship-based practice (Ruch, 2018), we have each tried to keep these on the agenda throughout our encounters with each other. Thus, we have sought to think consciously about our 'use of self', examining preconceptions and motivations and checking in with each other on a regular basis (see Munro et al., 2004; Rose, 1997). Furthermore, through practices such as this – our collaborative writing – we have begun to uncover deeper understandings of our relationship and ourselves.

Why now?

We have already suggested that this was a particular time for us both, thanks to the impact of Covid-19 and its repeated 'lockdowns' and our age and stage as individuals approaching and experiencing retirement from full-time work; the idea of synchronicity has much to offer here (see Jackson, 2021). There has already been extensive research on the impact of Covid-19 and its lockdowns in the UK and across the world. Much of this has explored the negative consequences of the pandemic for the physical and mental health and wellbeing of people of all ages (for example, Brown and Zinn, 2022; Dib et al., 2020; Mulholland et al., 2020). Significantly for social work, Lavalette, Ioakimidis and Ferguson (2020) have drawn attention to the in-built inequalities in the pandemic, as the poor and marginalised across the world were disproportionately adversely affected by the crisis. There has also, however, been some attention to the unanticipated positive by-products of 'lockdown', including a reduction in noise, water and air pollution (see Bhat et al., 2021) and greater appreciation of the benefits of physical exercise (for example, Cronshaw, 2022). There is also some evidence that Covid-19 and its lockdowns led to both negative and positive outcomes *at the same time*; that the strategies that different individuals and groups were forced to adopt had ambivalent results (for example, Yen et al., 2021).

For our own part, we both independently acknowledge the pros and cons of the pandemic as it affected us. We were fortunate enough not to have experienced significant harm, financially or in terms of our physical health (we both have pensions and neither of us had Covid in the first year, although Viv has had it since). It seems at least possible that we were more open to the unforeseen contact with each other because contact with others (family and friends) was limited and, at times, non-existent. Hence, we looked forward to our Zoom meetings. Meanwhile, the thoughtful emails and sharing of intelligent online reading was a joy to look forward to in the intellectual desert that was 'lockdown'.

We were also, as stated already, approaching and experiencing retirement. Like 'lock-down', and then *because* of 'lockdown', this brought both challenges and new possibilities. Retirement inevitably means different things to different people, depending on their relative wealth and social class, gender, race/ethnicity, sexuality, health and disability, etc. (see, for example, Blackburn, Jarman and Racko, 2016; Calvo, Madero-Cabib and Staudinger, 2018; Ravenswood and Harris, 2016). For academics, there may be no clear division between work and retirement. It is still possible to do everything you did previously (writing, researching, PhD supervision, giving lectures and seminars), the only difference being that payment is usually through your pension, not your salary. Crow's (2021) study of UK academics in retirement demonstrates the very different trajectories experienced, with some people even intensifying their scholarly activities. Crow notes that 'Making a clean break from an academic role is rare, while uncertainty about the meaning of retirement is common' (2021: 604). The additional challenge for Bob and Viv during Covid-19 was to create a new life when everything else was either closing or already closed down. But another way of looking at this was that this was exactly the time to embrace a new relationship and a new learning opportunity.

What part did, and do, digital technologies play in our developing relationship?

To return to the central claim of the abstract, we believe that digital technologies allowed the relationship between Bob and Viv to emerge and then to flourish. While the 1991 letter, once responded to, had been read and forgotten, the email 30 years later, with its immediate response, propelled the beginnings of an encounter enacted on Zoom in which both 'actors' could see and hear one another in real time and record these meetings for future research. The digitised thesis, meanwhile, introduced Bob to new understandings of the competing discourses that had dominated his early years; for example, he was able to make connections with ideas about the 'psy deluge' (the influence of psychology, psychiatry and psychoanal-ysis on social work following the First World War) and also the 'permanency movement' (which favoured adoption as a longer-term childcare solution than fostering or residential care) (see Cree, 1993). At the same time, the redacted, microfiched case file demonstrated loudly and clearly to Viv the paucity and repetitiveness of the case file, where certain stories are repeated as 'facts' again and again (see Clapton, 2021). But she was also impressed to see that the agency had maintained contact with Bob well into his adulthood. She realised how many people (social workers and committee members) had played an active part in his childhood and early adult life.

Most of all, we discovered the democratising potential of digital technologies (see Hacker and van Dijk, 2000), as Zoom meetings and email gave us the opportunity to explore ideas and test out hypotheses with each other. We learned from each other and are still doing so now, as we write this article collaboratively (see Siltanen, Willis and Scobie, 2008). We are also aware, however, that there were (and are) risks inherent in digital technologies: risks of hacking, of contraventions of confidentiality, of crossed boundaries and manipulation (see Ma, 2020). And there are the same risks present in any and all relationships: risks of mis-understandings, of being vulnerable, of 'losing face', of losing objectivity (see, for example, Angel and Vatne, 2017; Stanton, Slatcher and Reis, 2019; Tsai, 2016; Whittle and Stevens, 2016). Every new relationship is a journey into the unknown, just as all learning inevitably contains fear of letting go of long-held beliefs and fear of the unknown (see Rogers, 1969).

Our own experience of digital technologies mirrors the findings of recent research on the impact of digital technologies on social work practice (see Ferguson, Kelly and Pink, 2021;

Garrett, 2005; Green et al., 2015; Pink, Ferguson and Kelly, 2022). While it is generally accepted that digital technologies 'crept in to' social work practice (Mishna et al., 2012), there has also been recognition of both the risks and the potential benefits of this. Pink, Ferguson and Kelly have gone so far as to argue that a hybrid practice (integrating video calls and face-to-face interactions) is here to stay. They conclude:

> We should learn from the creative and improvisatory modes of engagement with technology demonstrated by social workers, children and families during the pandemic...These insights can be effectively mobilised to shape a framework for an adaptable digital social work practice and training that will enable social workers to better evaluate when and how digital technologies and media will best support their practice and judgments. (2022: 428)

Conclusion

Looking forward, we would like to suggest that the relationship that we now have is illustrative of what new and unexpected relationships might occur in the future as technology makes it increasingly possible and easier for those who have experienced the care system to access their pasts and the people who have played a key role in their lives, whether virtually or in the 'real' world. This is not something that should make children and family social workers anxious. On the contrary, as we hope to have shown, both parties have much to gain from such an encounter. Nevertheless, we believe that the potential for a positive outcome will be immeasurably increased if the encounter can be viewed from within the context of co-inquiry and mutual learning, rather than one of a conventional, hierarchical 'social worker–client' relationship. For the last 30 years or so, the user movement has sought to drag a reluctant social work profession in the direction of more egalitarian roles and relationships and more participatory processes (see Beresford and Croft, 1993; Beresford and Harding, 1993). Might a co-inquiry model, perhaps facilitated by digital technologies, offer a contribution to this?

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